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BLACK NURTURE:
ORAL TRADITION AS MODEL FOR TODAY

A Dissertation
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the Faculty of the School of Theology
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

This work will examine the transmitting of folk belief and value systems in the context of West African traditional religion, American slavery, and succeeding generations of Blacks for the purpose of finding possible solutions to the current methodological crisis in Christian Education. Cultures which have been considered primitive often communicate their religious beliefs and value systems far more effectively than supposedly sophisticated middle class religious cultures and church programs which are highly structured.

The goal of this dissertation is to develop an approach which deals specifically with the issues of ministry in Black culture. One of the problems of formal church education is that there usually has been provided only one strategy. The same error exists in secular education - one curriculum for all kinds, conditions and cultures of people. This work will probe the historical and cultural roots of the Black church for its strengths. These, in turn, will be evaluated for adaptation into contemporary models of nurture and character education. The methods used can be summed up in the three words "folk oral tradition." The structure in which this "primitive" communication takes place is the nuclear and the extended

family/society. The solutions proposed in this work will be illustrated to some extent in narratives of life and learning in contemporary Black religion and culture.

An assessment of the religious nurture of the American Sunday School indicates that it has not been effective, and its failure has largely influenced character education. If the trend continues, we are less than a generation away from being uncivilized at any given moment. The failure of the church school; the failure of public education; the failure to utilize contemporary restraints have only added to the problem of communicating beliefs and values.¹

What this work hopes to develop is a model that can fill the void created by the church school failure. Better, it might be stated that this work seeks to restore the process which the Sunday School tried unsuccessfully to replace. The dissertation was nearly completed when attention was called to Harvey Cox's Seduction of The Spirit. Cox's work destroys all possible pretensions to Black uniqueness. In it, he clearly indicates that all preliterate cultures partook of the same use and strength of oral tradition as illustrated in the Black culture studied herein. This model will be based upon the oral

¹Robert W. Lynn and Elliott Wright, The Big Little School (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 94-99.

heritage of the Afro-Americans, rooted in the folk tradition of the African experience and the coping and compensating experience of the Blackamerican in the slave period and after.

This work will develop a family centered model with promotional and supplemental activities carried on by the church. It will utilize historic and contemporary strengths of the folk culture of Blackamericans. This model should be a resource for parents desiring to prepare children for life despite the current educational and environmental handicaps. Nothing is more crucial for this preparation than an adequate belief system and world view, coupled with a system of values and principles peculiar to Blackamericans.

Theoretical ethics is of itself quite important but the real ethics of personhood is often deeply imbedded in the unconscious responses which are in fact judgments. These are made daily and without premeditation. Much of what is considered ethical practice is conditioned by one's sense of identity and perception of others. The kinds of values transmitted are deeply imbedded or engrained in the psyche. Ethics take on meaning, after they have been communicated - caught or taught and practiced.

An excellent illustration of the communication is to be found in the African culture's approach to

permissiveness. It is evidenced in the weight that is placed on the child's value as a person and the individual right to make decisions as dramatically portrayed in proverbs and folk tales.

Black culture is heavily oriented toward oral communication and tradition.² The religious beliefs of the captives of the period of slavery in America, and of their West African forbears, were naturally expressed from memory. The power and educational potential of this tradition came forcefully to the author's attention upon encountering the astounding memorization skills common in the culture of West Africa. The majority of tribal members were naturally expected to know, quote, and live by the folk beliefs and principles of their heritage. Yet no one seemed to be aware of how or when these wise sayings and tales were learned. How can one quote proverbs for hours and yet not know when they were memorized? What motivation and involvement could cause such remarkable retention without the benefit of a Sunday school? How can ordinary parents communicate the tradition so well and yet not have in mind a common equivalent for the English verb "to train?" The chief concern of this work is to explore how

²George P. Rawick, The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1972), I, xviii, 95-100. Cf. John W. Blassingame, The Slave Community (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 20 ff.

these historic modes of communication and religious education can be adapted to meet the needs of contemporary Blacks and others. A sizable goal indeed.

No attempt will be made, therefore, to go so far as to test the models of communication/education which will be developed here. Rather, the bulk of the findings will be formulated in guides to be used in the church and/or a family's effort to recover the folk/oral tradition. Included in this work will be stories - imaginative, folkloric narratives of parents and others of the extended family, engaging in the communication of culture as beliefs and values. These testimonies serve as research reports from past experiences and as models for the future.

In choosing the effective "indoctrination" methods of Africa and earlier Black America, this does not negate the existence of other methods. Nor is there any romantic belief that West African memorization, for instance, produced the perfect society. The writer is not unaware of the dangers of over attempts to program the minds of the young. However concern must also be given to the awful handicap suffered by the child whose most substantial beliefs and values have been absorbed from the culture and values of commercial television. This work will provide interested parents with a means of gaining "equal time" with a portion of the values and the system of sharing them coming from an African society whose crime

rates and other societal indexes commend them. Other models will be taken from the era of slavery of Blacks in America and since Reconstruction. Concern here will be limited to or focused on those models of communication/education which have been influential in or parallell to the formation of earlier Black models.

Again in keeping with the emphasis on recovery of strengths from oral traditions, no comprehensive analysis of contemporary literature on education or religious education will be attempted. Only such educational issues and methods will be dealt with as are essential to the understanding and implementation of the models developed, with some small attention to how these contrast with the methods which have been prevalent in American education.

Definition of Terms

The term Black Christian Nurture is used to refer to the process of socialization and communication of value systems and world view in the church-centered segment of the Black masses in America. It includes formal and informal instruction, with emphasis on the latter. Informal instruction is assumed to take place both intentionally and incidentally, in the whole range of wisdoms common to the culture, as well as in crises such as illness, death, need, and threats to community life.

The terms Black culture and Black cultural context

are used to refer to the heritage of traditional responses and ideas common to the vast majority of America's Black minority. While no aspect of this culture may be considered socially, ethically or religiously unique, the style and emphases have a character of their own. This character is traceable along a continuum which originates in West Africa. The African root-stage of the culture is well preserved in the towns and villages of West Africa today. It is out of exposure to this stage that the whole motivation to engage in this study emerged.

The West African culture makes no dichotomy between the sacred and the secular culture as is common in Western culture. All is sacred, and yet African people are quite prone to take this world very seriously and pragmatically. The Black American culture inevitably stands somewhat between the African and the Western or European. The church-oriented Black masses whose practices are studied here tend to be much closer to the African wholeism. They, too, tend to think nothing as being profane or without sacred significance. Socialization is synonymous with Christian Education, and intermediate terms like character education blend with both.

The word oral is used to describe the tendency of African and Blackamerican culture to depend on the spoken word as opposed to the written word. The historic basis for this emphasis in both cultures is found in pre-colonial

West African society, where the whole corpus of traditions, customs, and rules was maintained meticulously, yet dynamically, by memory. This, of course, was not unique to West Africa; but it was done so well that, apart from some writing by Muslim immigrants, beginning in the medieval period and occasioned by business transactions outside the extended family, there was no felt need for writing. Unlike current issues of literacy in ghetto schools, there was never any real question about African ability; they did not need print, memories were so accurate in their culture. This is a point which will be stressed throughout the study, especially as we draw upon the major sources (Mibiti, Delano, and Rattray). On the other hand, instances of West African capability with the pen had been more than amply demonstrated just north of slave-producing regions, particularly in the huge library holding at Timbuktu of the 12th Century.³ A parallel to this would be non-literate slave preachers who exhibited great memory skills often repeating Bible passages after one or two hearings.

The 20th century move towards emphasis on oral communication, which has stemmed from such causes as television's rise both in importance as an educational medium and in its attractiveness and technical excellence,

³Samuel Johnson and O. Johnson (eds.), The History of The Yorubas (Nigeria: C.S.S Bookshops, 1941), pp. 3 ff.

is thus a movement towards joining a longstanding pattern among Blacks. It would be more foolish than ever to belittle, or to continue, now, to bypass what has turned out to be an historic Black-culture strength. Print is now recognized as a substitute, only, for spoken words. Black educators, religious and otherwise, must work from this premise no matter how much they may have indulged, previously, in self hatred born of white interpretations of ghetto reading scores.

One other definition should be advanced. The concept of the extended family is crucial in both West African and Blackamerican culture. The communicating community which has trained and must continue to train Blacks is an intimate community; persons are important. Their words are retained both because they are spoken in meaningful context and because the speaker is bound to the learner by the loving ties of kinship. In West Africa the kinship was by blood unto the ninth generation. What Americans would call fourth cousins were, in the same age set, literally sisters or brothers. Likewise, there were many mothers and fathers and aunts and uncles. In America the church and community of the Black masses have tended to maintain the kinship community with or without blood ties. Church folk and street-culture people alike use the terms "sister" and "brother" meaningfully. Soul Sister or Soul Brother is often equivalent to blood relative.

The Black Experience of oppression has maintained the group or extended family consciousness. Acculturation of the young, thus, is accomplished not alone by parents but by a larger family of significant persons, all of whom feel responsibility for the Black child. Even if a Black child is neglected or unwanted in his nuclear family, he can always find an aunt, a grandfather, or even a substitute parent outright, to introduce him to society and reality. This is the Black Extended Family at its best, individually and collectively, engaged in emotional support and in training for life, both consciously and otherwise.⁴

Goals of This Project

This work will seek to develop contemporary ways of acculturation/education after viewing the effectiveness, first, of oral training in the course of simply living in the extended family context of West Africa. The same survey approach will then be applied to the communication of world view and value system in the American slave society and subsequent free society. This will include a view of the value of children in the culture into which they are to be received and oriented. It will cover such de facto educational media as conversation formal and informal,

⁴LaVerne McCummings (comp.), The Black Family, National Conference of Black Social Workers, February 21-23, (Philadelphia: MMS Public Relations, 1969), pp. 32-34.

palaver or rapping, proverbs, folk tales, folk festivals, worship and other traditional expressions of culture.

Written documentation of the educational processes of early and even contemporary Blacks is meager. The print-oriented world tends to look upon Blacks as non-persons, having no values or deep thoughts about reality. The present-day evidence of the continuity of the African pattern is authentic only because the non-urban West African culture is relatively unchanged from what it was in the days of the slave trade. Realities are thus recorded in life rather than on paper. The Blackamerican process is best illustrated among people over fifty, who have themselves been a part of a segregated culture where the oral communication was preserved and effective. The very act of segregation and oppression designed to destroy Black dignity served as a means to the survival of Black culture, that which the slave society had methodically attempted to destroy.

A set of tentative explanations of the effectiveness seen in the culture of value transmission will then be developed. These will be used as a basis for a set of contemporary guidelines for experimentation among Black and other families and churches. The testing will be informed by the best of old Black oral traditions, coupled with the freshest insights about child development and communication. The goal will be not a return to the total indoctrination

of minds, but the development of youth who have a workable Black Christian world view and value system. Out of this could come the ability to cope with life in the contemporary ghetto.

The final stage of this work will consist of a set of stories and other activities which illustrate the effectiveness of the training of contemporary Blacks and suggests guidelines. The folkloric narratives will be drawn from a wide spectrum of sources in contemporary West Africa and Blackamerican culture, as well as from favorite biblical passages of Black church life and culture. The naratives will include the dynamics of family dialogue in applying the revived traditions to the emotional needs and value challenges of the Black ghetto child. A range of types of teaching situations will be illustrated in readable stories which will hopefully find interest and retention among the young. The format of the stories will invite oral repetition and the generation of parent child interaction.

The parent group will not become dependent on the material as permanent literature, but will set about role-playing their own situations and applying their own biblical texts. The family or church would develop its own oral tradition, which would be articulated and communicated to its children at the most meaningful times, usually in the normal course of family life, as opposed to a formal teaching situation. Perhaps, then, their children would

grow up to embrace a profoundly relevant Christian view of the world, and to practice a vibrant Black Christianity, and never know, as did their forefathers, just when they learned it all.

Summary

The purpose of this work is to develop models for the utilization of the oral in the religious and cultural orientation and growth of children, both Black and whosoever-else-will. The modern church has sponsored a great variety of experiments in worship, communications, and Christian nurture and family life. These have all too often been literally "off the wall" or "out in left field," in the sense that they have had no cultural roots. Wittingly or unwittingly, the attempt has been made to create a culture on a drawing board, isolated from the dynamic folk processes where authentic culture is generated.

1. This model will attempt to launch an experiment in Christian nurture, which is at once very traditional and conceivably avant-garde in the media chosen.

2. The materials developed will be submitted for publication by a denominational press.

3. Current enthusiasm concerning the project indicates commitment to utilization of the materials and models developed.

4. This is the beginning of a continuing process

of developing other innovations in Black Christian training. The findings of the study may become the hypothesis for additional scholars to explore.

Chapter 2

CULTURE COMMUNICATION IN WEST AFRICA

Communication of beliefs and values from one generation to another in West Africa today is, at once, the survival of a feature of the ancient world and a marvel to modern educators. The task is accomplished largely in the extended family. Here the child is carefully instructed in preparation for age-set initiations, or is indoctrinated in happy participation in the life-affirming celebrations of the village/family (tribe). Also, much of what the child learns is simply "caught" or "picked up" in the discussions and decisions of everyday life. Much input is transmitted and received unconsciously, while that which is consciously taught is especially effective because it is offered in meaningful context. That is to say, truth communicated is understood and retained because the immediate life situation illustrates and gives emotional support and significance to the idea. Further, the relationship of love and respect for the extended family member/teacher provides additional motivation, rapport, and reenforcement for the communication of culture and values.

In West Africa, even in the cities, traditional societal structures still tend, where ties exist, to be well knit or organized, whether they be the nuclear or cognatic family, the extended family, the small village

ties, or the larger kinship groupings. In other words, the author's experience with West Africans indicates them as having a well developed sense of community, marked by widespread relationships of both loyalty and responsibility.

Pope Paul II wrote in 1967:

As regards community life - which in African tradition was family life writ large - we note that participation in the life of the community, whether in the circle of one's kinsfolk or in public life, is considered a precious duty and the right of all. But exercise of this right is conceded only after progressive preparation through a series of initiations whose aim is to form the character of the young candidates and to instruct them in the traditions, rules, and customs of society.¹

The Holy Father is not African, but his evaluation is very accurate.

Julius Nyerere, President of the East African nation of Tanzania, echoes this approval of the African traditional ideal of community:

In our traditional African society we were individuals within a community. We took care of our community, and the community took care of us. We neither needed nor wished to exploit our fellow men.²

What he says about East Africa is equally true of West Africa.

An African's self-concept is determined by his relationship to his community. This still appears to be

¹Pope Paul II, "Africae Terrarum" Catholic Mind, Vol. LXVI (January 1968), 54.

²Julius Nyerere, Ujamaa (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 7.

true in Nigeria and Ghana even today. The goodness or badness of an individual is defined in communal or group terms. Goodness, which was and is defined according to one's contribution to the total community, is taught, supported and indeed enforced by the total community. This focus on the welfare of the whole society tends to give persons a very orderly and secure existence. The unpredictable and that which is beyond control, both natural phenomena and human imponderables, is attributed to the world of spirits. However, this world is never so negative and threatening as to undermine the self-concept. The superstitious, fear-laden "native" is a figment of the imagination of novelists and missionaries.

Much in the traditional, orderly moral framework of West African communities is common sense ethics for living harmoniously together. Unfortunately, many sent to Africa as Christian missionaries simply were not open and sensitive to these functional values.³ In their zeal to "save the heathen" and to establish "right" according to Western culture, they often wrought havoc in the lives of the communities where they served. In such a well knit societal context, the major ethical issues and the crises

³John S. Mibiti, African Religions and Philosophy (New York: Praeger, 1969), p. 234. Cf. Chinua Achebe, Things Fall Apart (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1959), pp. 133-150.

defined by the African reading of life were bound to be quite different from those seen by white foreigners. For instance, traditional value systems in marriage and in democratic processes were evolved to meet a set of needs greatly contrasting with those of Europe or America. Monogamy, in a West African context, could become reckless irresponsibility; and what whites saw as dictatorship was often an extremely sophisticated system of communal governance. West African values are humane, functional, and well communicated.

Close analysis of the communication media of West African and slave traditions will be viewed with the ethical content as social standard and as formative influence for character development and the socialization of persons. The ethics and world view of West African society were and are expressed in songs (danced and spoken), folk tales and proverbs, with the latter dominating.

The proverb lent itself to a wider variety of uses for performance or for simple repetition in conversation. Proverbs are seriously learned in the intensive preparations for the initiation rites of the various sets; they are sung and danced, drummed and dramatized, in various rituals and festivals; utilized to score points in formalized discussions and deliberations, or palaver, of the community's council of elders, or the formal or informal chatting of the serious or social functions of the whole

community; and most of all they are widely repeated in the everyday admonitions and small talk of every traditional family. In Yoruba society, for instance, nobody could be considered educated, respected, or well reared unless he was able to quote and interpret the proverbs relevant to any given situation in life. Virtually every academic examination in the Yoruba language today still contains questions involving the proverbs in one form or another.⁴

One Yoruba proverb explains their importance:

A proverb is the horse which carries a subject under discussion along; if a subject goes astray, we use a proverb to track it.⁵

The Ashanti agree with this. They state the imperative for knowing the wisdom preserved in the proverbs with this cutting comment:

When the fool is told a proverb, the meaning of it has to be explained to him.⁶

One studies and lives proverbs all his life. Just as faithful Christians find new significance, year after year, when they reread scripture, West Africans likewise grow in their understanding of the traditional proverbs.

⁴Isaac O. Delano, Owe L'Esin Oro: Yoruba Proverbs: Their Meaning and Usage (Ibadan, Nigeria: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. ix.

⁵Delano, p. 109.

⁶R. Sutherland Rattray, Ashanti Proverbs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1916), p. 152.

The Yoruba say it:

The ogidigbo talking drum is sounded in proverbs, only the wise can dance to it, and only the experienced can understand it.⁷

Proverbs as a discipline of study are not a mere intellectual exercise for West Africans. Nor are they the proof texts and rigid rules of a fundamentalist approach to their culture and religion. They are an essence of the life of West Africa. Flexibility prevails despite the seemingly universal capacity to quote proverbs at great length. This is true, for instance, among the city-dwelling Yoruba of Ibadan as well as rural Nigeria. In Western culture, traditional beliefs and ideals are now verbalized mainly by the pious and religiously intent, while in West African culture an impressive proportion of spontaneous communication is devoted to what might broadly be referred to as religious and ethical proverbs. Western religion, even with a state church, has little to show that its world view and value system prevail in the culture at large. But the religious and ethical folk traditions of West Africa continue to function as the controlling influence in the lives of all but the most Westernized. Thus the traditions are normative both as wisdom and as working models for life.

Here is a model of a culture where beliefs and

⁷Delano, p. 16.

principles of behaviour, as Westerners might describe them, still loom large in the major medium of communication. In West Africa the medium is direct conversation. This may not be true a few years hence, since mass media (e.g., radio and television etc.) are rapidly developing. In West Africa, as in America, the media advertisements are devoted primarily to the sale of goods and services; and very little time and money are appropriated for the productions which explain and conserve traditional culture. Despite radio and television, for the time being, the belief structures through proverbs are not affected. One can easily see how effectively world view and ethical values can be communicated to a total culture.

The major communication medium of American culture is television, implemented by a vastly superior technology, and largely directed towards commercial gain. This results in an unfortunately accurate emphasis on materialistic values and culture not only in the advertisements but in the quasi-religious symbolism of the arts.⁸ Christian world view and value system have neither equal time nor comparable sophistication and impact. Consequently Christianity is relegated to the status of a feeble counter culture. The author's experience in West Africa

⁸Harvey Cox, The Seduction of The Spirit (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), pp. 14, 275.

has proved convincingly that Black and other Christian families and churches must honestly embrace their minority status in an essentially non-Christian religious and ethical context. They must then learn how to define, teach, and celebrate their counter culture in a manner that approaches what survives of West African intensity and enjoyment of a culture saturated with sound beliefs and values.

The traditional African belief and value systems have profound implications for the child's psychic as well as religious and ethical formation. Comparably specific input for the emotional development of the child have not been characteristic of Western culture. In fact, childhood has only been duly recognized as childhood within the last three centuries of Western history. Prior to that time the first step out of infancy was de facto adulthood, with almost no Western counterparts to the African age set initiations or rites de passage. Medieval European artists nearly always portrayed children as scaled-down adults. This bespoke not only insensitivity but a blatant denial of the personal worth of the young. Required to perform as adults, children were never accorded respect or status at their own level. African value judgements concerning children contrast sharply. Every child is valued highly, and not to have children is among the worst catastrophes which can befall an adult.

Traditionally, there were marriages that were not formalized until the bride was pregnant and fairly certain not to have a miscarriage. On children hangs one's whole aspiration to the African summum bonum, that of being or becoming one of the great ancestors.

The West African child is virtually worshipped and shamelessly "spoiled," by Western standards. His will is respected wherever possible. The Ashanti proverb asks, "Is it only when a child cries that he is given the breast?"⁹ The implication is that he is to be carefully attended to, so that his needs can be anticipated and met at all times. Another Ashanti proverb declares that a child's hand is not hard to fill.¹⁰

In striking contrast, the rigid Western patterns of dealing with growing children do not deeply respect either the child or his wishes, from the earliest period of life. Adult will is projected on the child by highly structured schedules, signaled by clanging school bells, often with stringent demands and meticulously directed thought and activity. All this is expected to "train" a child, but, on the contrary, it denies his integrity, frustrates his curiosity and experimental initiative, and discourages all but the most conventional creativity. In the public schools and private families of the West this overdirective

⁹Rattray, p. 101. ¹⁰Rattray, p. 102.

pattern is passing away, but its traditional hold lingers on. It is most ironical that the most repressive of British methods still prevail almost unchallenged in the schools of English speaking West Africa. However, the British educational methods do not appear to have corrupted the traditional estimate of child worth during the crucial and formative early years. Childish experimentation is indulged and encouraged in the African environment of protection and sympathetic support of the budding ego.¹¹

When children go to pluck them (the mpempema mushroom [very tiny and grown close together], they do not do so skillfully; when grownups go to do so, they trample on them. [It is virtually impossible to pick them, says the proverb, but at least children can do a better job than adults.]¹²

No one sends a child on (a difficult) errand and gets angry (if he does not perform it well).¹³

¹¹Note: The West African proverb throughout the work will be recorded in the following manner because of its subtlety and indirectness. Interjected interpretations will be bracketed. This should assist in a quicker grasp of the meaning. This will be over and above the explanations of the various editors of the proverbs, which will appear in parentheses. This two-stage attempt to avoid the pitfalls of misleading editorial signals is itself evidence of the validity of the traditional statements about the need to be steeped in interpretation. But the problem of code is only one. There also exist problems or difficulties of profundity and esoteric symbolism. Thus, while I am painfully aware that interjections of explanation spoil the flow of art, the quotation of these proverbs would be useless without comment in many places, and without the decoding of the more farfetched (by Western standards) allusions.

¹²Rattray, p. 106. ¹³Rattray, p. 107.

When a child does what is not (usually) done, he perceives what is not (usually) perceived.¹⁴

When a child says he is going to climb the stump of a tree, let him climb (it), for when he has gone up it (a little way) he will turn back again.¹⁵

When a child pretends to be dying, (the best thing to do) is to pretend to bury him.¹⁶

When a child says he will catch hold of fire, let him catch hold of it, for when it burns him he will (soon) throw it away.¹⁷

The affirmation of childish selfhood evidenced by these Ashanti proverbs is shocking to a probable majority of Western minds. Yet it is no more than deep respect for human personality, expressed in a kind of awe before each destined-to-be-unique personality. No traditionally raised African child should ever have to wonder about his personal worth and dignity when he has been so subtly respected that grown people have been shy about trying to control his life in any but the most crucial emergency decisions.

The Gonjas of northern Ghana have another set of very colorful expressions in their proverbs on the same theme. One of them goes thus:

It is only your ulcer that I am cleaning, I am not going to apply medicine to it. (A father can only advise a son, he cannot prevent him from doing evil.)¹⁸

The Yoruba have a version of this theme which deals

¹⁴Rattray, p. 104. ¹⁵Rattray, p. 105.

¹⁶Rattray, p. 104. ¹⁷Rattray, p. 106.

¹⁸O. Rytz (ed.), Gonja Proverbs (Legon, Ghana: Institute of African Studies, 1966), p. 46.

with the choice of a vocation:

'Be like me, be like me', these words make one a hard master. (Parents are advised by this proverb to allow their children to follow their natural bent. They should not be forced to follow, against their will, the particular trade or profession which the parents happen to favour.)¹⁹

The author can quote experiences of bold, practical expression of the self worth generated in this nurturing, supportive, self-affirming type of atmosphere. At a Nigerian crossroad market place, children as young as three and four were engaged in haggling over prices of their wares, bidding for sales of small items, and even computing the change due their customers. When, as occurred rarely, a smaller child was about to make a mistake and get cheated, an eight year old with righteous indignation and courage, coupled with complete self confidence, would interfere and set matters right by challenging adults with ease.

As the Gonja proverb quoted has indicated, the respect of the parent extends all the way to the right to make mistakes and to commit evil. The Ashanti reverently respect the child's right to try to climb a tree stump with no branches, even though one version of the proverb suggests that he will slide back down and perhaps be hurt. The fact is that he has the right to hurt himself, also,

¹⁹Delano, p. 26.

within limits. This has been seen already in the right to burn his fingers. This attitude amounts to an affirmation of love which is expressed as an extremely mature and sophisticated concern for the child's self realization.

African children are quite systematically instructed as to the limits on their freedom and the importance of knowing well and observing carefully the traditional rules and customs. Their degree of self realization must not be assumed to have been achieved in a spoiled, over-permissive vacuum. West Africans are as prone to respect and stand in awe of the group as they do of the child. Their children are expected to grow up with the same respect for the group. There is a wide variety of proverbial material on this subject, as exemplified by these selected samples from the well organized Ashanti proverbs:

The child which is to turn out any good is not reared entirely on a beautiful mat. [A careful realism is encouraged, as we shall deal with at greater length later.]

Children must know the culture, and know it correctly.

When you go into some village, the songs which the children sing, the old folk once sang and left behind them (that is, tradition handed down).

When your child [does the traditional] dances badly, tell him, saying 'Your dancing is not good', and do not say to him, ' (Little) soul, just dance as you want to'.²⁰

²⁰Rattray, pp. 101, 103.

Respect for others is every bit as important as the respect lavished on the child. He must look to his parents to instruct him in the ways he is expected to practice this respect for others. A Yoruba parenthetical insertion after a proverb is pertinent here:

'Child, always keep your eyes on me.' We keep our eyes on the person with whom we go out visiting. (The Yoruba are particular about the training of their children. In the public or at the house of a friend, he is expected to keep his eye on the grownup with whom he came in case the grownup wishes to warn him, either by look or sign (but not by speech) about his conduct.)²¹

The Ashanti illustrate another kind of indication for the learner to help him maintain proper respect:

When you go to someone else's house, and the owner is squatting there on the ground, you do not ask him for a stool.

Children are expected to learn the established way and to be as courteous and helpful as they can as well.

When the elder and the children know how to adapt their steps to one another's, they (the children) carry his bag.

So when they fail to heed parental teachings concerning the responsibilities which are theirs, the culture is not at all permissive or indulgent, but rather realistic.

When a child does not hear the words of his father and mother, there is no misfortune in that (... he partakes of food in which is no salt).²²

²¹Delano, p. 101

²²Rattray, pp. 184, 110, 102.

Indeed, notwithstanding the freedom accorded a child, it is inconceivable that he would be irresponsible enough not to enjoy doing his share, as is illustrated here:

No one sends a child on an errand and looks to see if he is pleased or not.

He is merely living up to the high respect given him in a world of mutual respect.

When a child knows how to wash his hands thoroughly, he and (his) elders (can) partake of food together. [It is far more significant than appears to Americans, since traditional food often involves dipping balls of a dough like staple into a common bowl of "soup" by hand!]

Again, in relation to a child's practice of honesty, the realistic result is so grave that:

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One falsehood spoils a thousand truths.

The seemingly harsh prohibition of even one tenth of one percent of prevarication is found to be reasonable when understood in the Ashanti context. There can never be the desperate need to tell lies in a society which respects people's humanity and provides their basic needs.

Everyone has the right to eat enough food to prevent hunger, no matter whose field it must be taken from. The context is one of mutual respect and high human values, in which social ties join with religious taboos to make people genuinely desirous of being trustworthy. One of the worst possible insults to a West African is that of being called

²³Rattray, pp. 103, 156.

a liar.

One incident might illustrate the aforementioned. A group of American Blacks were traveling on a Saturday night. The Yoruba bus mechanic was pressed into service on a roadside, after one of the all-too-numerous breakdowns. When the motor would run again, the bus left for Ife, with driver and mechanic forgetting the tools in the grass. When it broke down again the next morning, the mechanic rushed back to retrieve his tools. Just as the American group had anticipated, they were gone; but imagine the surprise when told that he had found them displayed prominently at the nearest crossroad. No child or adult had given a thought to removing them from the top of the wooden post simply because these valuable tools were not their property.

The West African is aware that honesty is a value to be practiced mutually. Whenever there is an imbalance of power and the usual injustices occur, it is understood that the smaller and weaker individual has to equalize the situation with intelligence and cunning including deception. The general prevalence of such honesty even within the mutual honesty of the extended family is not traceable to a rose-colored view of existence. It is a reality of life. The kinship group in West Africa may sound utopian, but it has its share of problems too. However, these problems and privations are not used to

rationalize departures from strict principle. Rather than following the Western hedonistic principle which denies pain and will go to any length to avoid it, the African child is taught to affirm a totality of life embracing both the pleasant and the unpleasant.

Instruction in world view is introduced shortly after birth, and continues to undergird moral and ethical decisions throughout life. After a prescribed number of days following birth, the infant is named in a "outdooring" ceremony. In this rite the baby is symbolically informed of the gamut of the experiences to be anticipated in life. The senior woman of the extended family touches the child's tongue with both pleasant and unpleasant tastes, the bitter and the sweet, and intones a ritual of realism. Even though the infant is lavished with gifts during the home visitations that follow, the more solemn and lasting lesson²⁴ is symbolized by the taste of bitter herbs. Nevertheless the gifts themselves are not an unmixed blessing.

A wry Yoruba proverb illustrates how deeply ingrained the gift tradition is, but no favor may be unilaterally taken for granted.

'Bring the child to greet me' always costs one money. (It is the custom of Yorubas to give presents

²⁴Note: On July 13, 1971, the author witnessed a careful reenactment of an outdooring ceremony by a Yoruba cultural group at the University of Ibadan.

to children brought to visit them; if the child is very young the present will be given to the mother.)²⁵

Part of the socialization process has to do with making children gratefully aware of their obligations to persons who have been kind to them. The Gonja proverb puts it quite bluntly:

They don't do a favor to you in order that you carry it in your head, but drag it out so that everybody may see the truth. (Let your children know about the favors you receive from others, and do not hide these from them.)²⁶

Another question which is bound to arise, especially with the current prevailing stereotypes about American Blacks, is that of the West African ethic of sex. There seems to be no specific advice on sex in the literature of published proverbs, but the total atmosphere is characterized by both honest openness and strict discipline. With such openness there appears to be no necessity for proverbs on sex. This openness is manifest, for instance, in what Americans would call topless attire on women, but their dignity transcends all prurient considerations. This manner of dress has all but disappeared from the major population centers of West Africa because of the warping influence of Euro-Americans.

Missionaries have contaminated many hinterland communities with their puritanical dichotomy of flesh and

²⁵Delano, p.113. ²⁶Rytz, p. 45.

spirit. This was often expressed in the rigid rules they erroneously hold essential to the Christian life. West African folk world view and ethics would recognize no such division. To them a mindless flesh is as inconceivable as a detached human spirit. Even the deities so prominent in traditional religion exist in a wholeness which demands their sharing in the meat and drink of their devotees and descendants. It is understood that food has a spiritual aspect, and it is this aspect on which the deities feast whenever offerings are placed in shrines, or libations are poured in a ceremony. This point is that the spirit-flesh dichotomy is denied at every level of existence, and that²⁷ all aspects of human life are affirmed in context.

A European or American might have considered the pregnant bride mentioned previously as having engaged in illicit pre-marital sex. The fact is that two people entered into a traditionally acceptable and highly responsible relationship. They would have been disappointed had not a child been conceived as a prelude and prerequisite to their happy marriage.

The white, middle class mind would raise a further question, that of the possibility of a conception followed

²⁷Ideas expressed by Kofi A. Opoku in a series of lectures for the Martin Luther King Black Church Studies Program ("Traditional African Religion") at the University of Ghana (Legon), July 13, 14, 17, 18, & 20 1972.

by a failure to formalize the marriage. At worst, this would be no problem in a culture with polygamous roots, given two provisions. One is that there are no serious promises made and broken. The other is that the West African father bears the full obligations of family support, as defined in the culture. To guarantee against both dishonest sexual exploitation and paternal irresponsibility there is always the grim specter of an aroused and indignant extended family. No traditional West African would dream of matching in his context the sexual irresponsibility of many of today's Americans. The African's strictness might not stem from a puritanical view of sex, but it would be hard to avoid the very functional and well-enforced view of the place of sex in the context of the West African extended family.

The most convicting evidence of the ethical bankruptcy of Western individualism might be its blatant exploitation of sex. On the other hand, the high and uninhibited wholeness of traditional West African sex mores seem to be by far the most telling validation of its culture.

Responsibility is the hallmark of West African child rearing. The obligation is to the entire extended family. When the family has been as supportive and instructive as they are traditionally, the relationship to all members is gladly affirmed rather than grudgingly

tolerated. One is dealing with a warm and wide-ranging network of brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, who may be as far afield as distant cousins according to Western terminology, but they are just what the titles say, "brothers" and "sister," etc. The support and advocacy which apply to sexual relations apply also to need in sickness and even to the costs of advanced education. This puts all valid social restrictions and obligations into a positive and, indeed, joyous frame of reference. Few traditions are as festive and humane, and yet realistically disciplinary.

It is clear that the Ashanti and other West African traditions for relating to children bear striking resemblance to some of the most liberal or avant-garde educational methods of our times. It is also obvious that the West African version is vastly superior in many ways to the Western, for example, in the development of mature, group-centered, responsible young people. Generations of irresponsible youth such as the "hippies" of the 60's have some very sound criticisms of the majority society, but their irresponsibility is also a scathing indictment of the overly permissive upbringing which many of them experienced. On the other hand, it seems probable that a residue of the West African style of child rearing among some of America's Black masses may account in part for the sparse Black presence in the hippie movement, despite the

justly revolutionary concerns of large numbers of sensitive young Blacks. It is also likely that most young Blacks have had little or no exposure to the permissiveness of the white middle class liberal.

In connection with the factor of permissiveness in Africa, one must not assume they have a kind of laissez-faire individualism. Rather, let it be understood that while the individual is highly valued, he is best valued and supported in a group or extended family context. Ethical decisions are made on the basis of the larger good, automatically. They are made at gut level and understood as the highest good for the total group. One is not foolishly drawn into the notion that one is capable of being blessed or having good fortune in isolation. Likewise, the security of personhood is born of emotional support of the total group.

Summary

The superior traditional African impact on the young is derived from four factors or characteristics.

First, West African tradition views new human life with an adoration which confers self worth even before self consciousness. This early affirmation of selfhood is not later withdrawn, but becomes a part of the continuing culture. Respect at adult level for persons is everywhere in evidence, and permissiveness toward small children,

which affirms their selfhood, is not done at the expense of disrespect for the adults.

The avant-garde permissiveness of liberal educators focuses more on performance than on being which places them in the predicament of respecting performance rather than persons. Because it is often impossible to perform in the fashion that Western society demands, neurosis starts early with the otherwise privileged middle-class child. His self worth is undermined by the awareness of his shortcomings on the performance scale. In contrast, West African respect is built into the culture in such a way that persons are dealt with respectfully regardless of station in life. This is not to say that there is not considerable social pressure against extreme forms of laziness or of industry over work if not "properly" directed. This influence towards neurosis usually starts within the most important formative years, undercutting self worth.

Second, African ethical ideals involve the total person around the clock. In Western practice, the school's ideology is overly intellectual and inadequately related to the total person. Frequently the schools and the home tradition are at odds, and prone to generate confusion in the child. The seeming permissiveness of the West African, therefore, is counterbalanced by a strong traditional set of proverbial rules which pervade home and school, estab-

lishing the importance of proper relationships to society as found beyond the permissive small family.

Third, West African permissiveness is therefore culture-based and time-tested, with adequate natural counterbalances. It lacks the doctrinaire extremes born of intellectualism and drawing-board culture. It does not seem to breed the juvenile outbursts common among children of Euro-American parents attempting the same permissiveness. It would appear that liberal moderns, who have revolted against all authority and traditional controls, have thrown out the baby with the bath.

Fourth, a factor or characteristic of impact on the West African young, the one most important for this study, has to do with the methods or modes of transmitting the values, ethics and beliefs of the culture. Formal training of the young in various age sets, etc. is in some ways parallel to Western patterns, but most of the learning takes place informally. The conversation, the community festivals, the various family rituals - the total spectrum of life is constantly communicated. A general style of child education and acculturation was brought with captured slaves to America. This formed the basic pattern of child rearing under the severest handicaps of slavery. For this reason, it is extremely important both as model and historical root what pattern of nurture presently prevails in the modern Black community.

The wider human community is no less affirmed and supported in traditional West African culture than is the individual. One need not be aggressive and violent in such a respectful and trustworthy setting. On the other hand, it is probable that much of the overaggressive behaviour of Western adults goes all the way back to the powerlessness and subtle abuse heaped on the most unnoticed of all minorities, the children. If so, the ethics and assignments of worth of the West African upbringing would go a long way toward healing the worldwide plague of Euro-American domination and exploitation. To say the least, West African patterns of communicating religious and ethical tradition have a great deal to offer the presently disintegrating world community.

The fact that West African values are effectively transmitted by the telling of tales and proverbs in this generation is demanding of serious consideration. For example, the Ashanti child is regaled with symbolic tales about all sorts of wild and domesticated animals and other living creatures. Chief of these is Ananse the spider, whose cleverness gives him the victory over much more powerful foes. He makes mistakes also, however, and often has to suffer the consequences. For instance, one day he had all the wisdom in the world in a gourd, as he climbed a tree. When his son told him a better way to carry the gourd he angrily slammed the gourd to the ground,

scattering and wasting the wisdom. The teaching here concerning anger is more obvious than that of many. Many teachings are spun out in the form of proverbs based on a tale, and many proverbs' meanings are wholly dependent on one's knowledge of the basic tale.

The influence of a celebrative culture with rituals for every major stage of life is equally arresting, especially to a culture in which there are few serious moments and no importance is attached to emerging life roles and their beginnings. The high value attached to children, with all that this means in sex and in other aspects of ethics, must surely have influenced West Africans who were captured and made slaves. The way they taught these values in African extended family circles also influenced the culture transmission of the captives, and this is the topic which is next considered.

²⁸Rattray, p. 73.

Chapter 3

THE NURTURE OF SLAVES

The ties of the African family/society and the hold of culture were so strong that the unbelievable horrors and depredation of slavery were incapable of destroying them. When one realizes that the slaves had almost no time for formal training or sharing of basic truths and values with their offspring, the survival of the structure of the Black family is revealed to be a miracle.

It was usual for men and women to work side by side on the plantation; and in many kinds of work, the women were compelled to do as much as men.¹

It is common knowledge that this work was required from sun up to sun down, leaving no time for what one might consider to be the usual approaches to child rearing.

Infants were permitted to go to the fields with their mothers but under severe restrictions.

Sometimes women with small babies were allowed to take their babies to the field and put them under trees until nursing time. A woman had better not stop to suckle her baby until she was told to do it, else she would be beat almost to death.²

¹Austin Steward, Austin Steward: Twenty-Two Years Slave and Forty Years a Freeman (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1969), p. 12.

²Clifton H. Johnson (ed.) God Struck Me Dead (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1969), p. 161.

If the master were especially interested, he established a definite routine for nursing the child.³

The average slave child, then, received virtually no rearing from his mother and/or his father during the working hours.

My mother, of course, had little time in which to give attention to the training of her children during the day. She snatched a few moments for our care in the early morning before her work began, and at night after the day's work was done.⁴

Since slave parents were primarily responsible for training their children, they could cushion the shock of bondage for them, help them to understand their situation, teach them values different from those their masters tried to instill in them, and give them a referent for self-esteem other than their master.⁵

Despite the enforced separation, the tenacity and resilience of the Black family were inescapably derived from some form of training-teaching. Whether the communication of family-oriented thinking be referred to as socialization, acculturation, indoctrination, or communication of a kind of oral tradition, the fact is that history has no better example of successful nurture under no more difficult a set of circumstances. It is the purpose, then, of this chapter to focus on the concatenation of elements which helped in the transmitting and maintenance

³John J. Blassingame, The Slave Community (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 94.

⁴Booker T. Washington, Up From Slavery (New York: Dell, 1965), p. 17. Cf. Blassingame, p. 94.

⁵Blassingame, p. 79.

of the Black family-oriented world view and value system.

It is the position of this work that the effectiveness of slave-family character training and religious nurture is attributable to the following factors, many of which are not normally associated with such educational processes. The five elements of the learning situation to be treated may be stated thusly:

1. Enforced intimacy of the slave community as optimum environment for teaching rapport.
2. The role of training as physical survival technique for a people under seige.
3. The role of all slave communication as means of psychic survival.
4. The role of the 3 R's as skills-keys to freedom.
5. The appeal and pedagogical advantage of the lively African-influenced oral tradition.

Intimacy and Rapport

One of the most overlooked aspects of the slave community, and indeed of the modern Black ghetto is what Dr. Charles H. Long refers to as "communities of intimacy."⁶ For him, the whole genius by which Blacks have maintained superiority of human values stems from a kind of inescapable intimacy which is a cultural characteristic of the slave community. It needs to be looked at carefully and

⁶Dr. Charles H. Long, Society for the Study of Black Religion, June 18, 1973, Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, Georgia.

reclaimed particularly in the community of intimacy called the church.

Perhaps the most outstanding example of the modern survival of enforced intimacy is in the jails of today. The prodigious, creative authorship of Black inmates is contemporary evidence of the stimulating influence of the intimate community.⁷

The intensity of the inescapable intimacy inside the Black community stems from the fact that it is compressed by oppression. To the extent that its territory is so small and that one's options outside of the compressed community take on extreme importance. To the extent that one has control of no material resources, one is forced to find fulfillment in human resources alone. Every relationship means so much. This is precisely what is meant by enforced intimacy and this was particularly true of the slave community. The fact that personal relationships were highly cherished was dramatically evident at every slave funeral, and in the slave's reaction to seeing others sold away. Masters knew it and that is the reason they tried to be dead sure that no one was around when they cut out a few "head" of slaves for sale.

⁷Malcolm X, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: Grove Press, 1964); Eldridge Cleaver, Soul On Ice (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968); George Jackson, Soledad Brother (New York: Bantaam Books, 1970); and George Jackson, Blood In My Eye (New York: Random House, 1972).

Aunt Amelia say: 'The day Marse White was to sell the chillun from their mother, he would tell that mother to do some work and in her absence he would sell the chillun.⁸

The same precaution was followed whether the slaves were related by blood or not. Children often established close and affectionate ties with the "kin" they could "count on."

In the Black community it is often assumed that titles like "aunt" and "uncle" were developed to bypass dignifying Blacks with "mister" or "mistress." There is considerable evidence that this is an accurate reading of white motives. However, the titles "aunt" and "uncle" were direct survivals of the African extended family community where every person was, in fact, given a title of family relationship and respect, according to age-set and other factors. Granted the absence of even remote ties of blood kinship, African captives conferred the titles on the enslaved substitutes for their extended family kin.

In the compressed and intimate slave community, it was impossible to conceive of any Black as unrelated. The title uncle was not a substitute for mister. Rather, it denoted esteem as blood kin, which in the African sense extends even to the ninth cousin of one's own parents. For the most part, the grannys, aunts, and uncles were

⁸George P. Rawick, The American Slave (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1972), XVI, 38.

supportive of the training that parents gave, and in many cases had to serve as parent surrogate. Especially was this true when people too old to work in the fields were assigned to child care, and when parents were sold away from their children.

Harrison neber see his mammy an 'pappy agin...one day I was out to cut sum wood an 'begin thinkin'. I run home to tell granny an 'de uthahs 'bout it.⁹

In the intimate community, all responsible adults were accorded the love of kinship and invested with kinship authority, both of which are essential to effective teaching rapport. Thus, any adult utterance or input which responded to a crisis was prone to teach the prevailing world view. In a sense, it is like Shakespeare's idea¹⁰ that "all the world's a stage." In the African captive community all the limited life processes took place in a de facto classroom, and all the grannys, "my grandmas and uncles and things"... and aunts were teachers.

Most of Master Jennings's slaves were hired out. He had four families of slaves, that is Aunt Caroline's family, Uncle Tom's family, Uncle Dave's family, and the family of which I was a member. None of these others were related by blood to us. My father had several brothers who lived on other places.¹²

⁹Rawick, XVI, 89.

¹⁰William Shakespeare, "As You Like It" Act II Scene 7.

¹¹Rawick, X:5, 352.

¹²Fisk University, "Unwritten History Slavery" (1929), p. 283. Cf. Rawick, XVIII.

Physical Survival Under Seige

Nobody's emotional life could be hidden in so intimate and besieged a setting; nor could its implications be ignored in the growing mind of a slave child. Every decision made by a slave was a lesson in something. Its weight need not be belabored verbally when every facial expression and tone of voice conveyed the seriousness of the situation. It should come as no surprise that slave children are recorded as being extremely sophisticated about survival, despite the fact that most records would attempt to portray them as happy innocent animals.

I was a little gal, but I remember how the white folks would come by, way back yonder in the old days, and ask me where was the niggers, and I would tell them, "I don't know." They would keep after me and sometimes I would tell them that they had went away and that was all I knowed. They used to tell me if I would tell them what they wanted to know that they would give me some candy. Of course, I, like other children, liked candy very much, but never could hardly get it. They would give me the candy but I would only tell them that they went away, and I didn't know where they went, just went away. Sometimes they would ask me, "Where is your mammy, little nigger?" and "aint you got no mammy" and "If you will tell me, I will give you some candy." I used to say sometimes, "Will you, sure 'nough?" and they would say, "Yes." They would give me the candy and I would tell them she had gone to keep the Yankees from getting her.¹³

The little girl in the narrative just quoted had learned the need to deceive the enemy. She had learned ways to do it, because her mother had dramatized the fact

¹³Fisk University, p. 189.

in a fashion that brought tears to her eyes some seventy years later. When her mother had been beaten every morning until she could take it no longer, she hid in a well, threatening suicide. She only agreed to come out when promised she would not be whipped anymore. How could any child who had looked down a well and seen her mother inches away from death, fail to know the gravity of the seige situation and the importance of every word, gesture and expression of such a teacher.

When small children were not aware of the seige, because of their own slightly better treatment, parents often carefully pointed out or showed the extreme vulnerability of their situation. One failure to pay a debt, or one death of a master slightly kinder than the others, and the child could be sold to the cruelest monster in the whole South. The following stories illustrate the point quite accurately. In the first instance, the child thus trained was Robert Smalls. Despite "his better treatment," he never ceased to yearn for freedom. It was he who commandeered a rebel ship. This turn of events made him a famous man. He became one of the best know heroes of the Civil War.

Lydia was afraid her son did not realize the meaning of slavery. To prevent him from being taken in by the comfort in which he lived, Lydia forced Robert to watch slaves being whipped in the yard of a Beaufort jail and often took him around the arsenal where the slaves were auctioned. She also told him stories about the sufferings of slaves and tried to instill a spirit

of identification between him and his less fortunate fellows... In these ways young Robert (Smalls) was made to realize the difference between the appearance of his life and the harsh realities of being a slave.¹⁴

I was the oldest child. My mother had three other children by the time I was six years old. It was at this age that I remembered the almost daily talks of my mother on the cruelty of slavery. I would say nothing to her, but I was thinking all the time that slavery did not seem so cruel.¹⁵

The slave community was often beseiged by unjust and violent powers, with the result that its life style amounted to a manual of arms designed to achieve simple physical survival. What a child learned about dealing "wid 'ole marse'" and what he learned about nature in general, had the weight of survival instructions to a parachuting commando. No child aware of the constant threat to his life dared take lightly the words of any responsible adult. His life might hang on what, under normal childhood circumstances, might be mere disrespect concerning a trifle. The life-and-death character of even the most innocent decisions is illustrated here:

Charlotte recalls how her oldest brother was whipped to death for taking part in one of the religious ceremonies.¹⁶

Worse than that, a child's mother's life might

¹⁴Okon Edet Uya, From Slavery To Public Service: Robert Smalls (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 4.

¹⁵Fisk University, p. 285.

¹⁶Rawick, XVII, 166.

hang in the balance.

For some reason Missus Jennings struck her [mother] with a stick. Ma struck back and a fight followed. Mr. Jennings was not at home and the children became frightened and ran upstairs. For half hour they wrestled in the kitchen. Missus, seeing that she could not get the better of Ma, ran out in the road ... She suddenly began to tear Missus Jennings' clothes off.¹⁷

Later when Fannie's husband heard Mr. Jennings say that "Fannie would have to be whipped by law, he told his wife about it. The slave resisted being sent away from her children, but that was all that could be done since her life was in jeopardy. The child remembered her mother's strength and stamina in the face of all odds.

The one doctrine of my mother's teachings which branded upon my senses was that I should never let anyone abuse me. I'll kill you, gal, if you don't stand up for yourself." she would say. "Fight, and if you can't fight, kick; if you can't kick, then bite." Ma was generally willing to work, but if she didn't feel like doing something, none could make her do it.¹⁸

At first sight it would appear that the learning situation element least likely to persist to the present would be the element of "physical survival in a community under seige." However, the unpunished slayings of Muslims in Los Angeles; the tragedy of students murdered at South Carolina State College in Orangeburg; the Panther slaughters in Chicago and other less published places; or

¹⁷Fisk University, p. 28.

¹⁸Fisk University, p. 284.

the student massacre at Jackson State in Mississippi can only suggest the contrary. The murderers in each case were representatives of "law and order."

No parent dare raise a child to hate police, but the black child who is naively unaware of the seige is ill equipped to deal with factors in his own survival. This bleak understanding should perhaps do more than any other to motivate Black parents to continue the slave tradition of accepting the complex task of education for survival in a hostile world. So great a task requires creative use of every possible opportunity for communication. The Jews in a hostile "Promised Land" put it this way:

And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.¹⁹

Psychic Survival

Chattel slavery was even more of a hazard to personhood than it was to life and limb. The constant danger was that of dehumanization - the inability any longer to keep the courage to be. In a world whose power figures systematically refused slaves recognition as persons, every slave relationship became all the more significant for psychic survival.

¹⁹Deuteronomy 6:6-8.

It has long been known that person-to-person relationships shape the human psyche. It is not often understood that the obverse is true - that failure to treat people as persons is failure to nourish their personhood, at whatever age level and under whatever circumstances.

Slaves were denied treatment as persons, no matter how human the responsibilities assigned them. The length to which the masters went in denying personhood constitute a truth stranger than fiction, and unbelievable to the point of being repressed. A typical denial of personhood is suggested by the nameless plight of Lewis Jordan, later to become the distinguished Executive Secretary of the National Baptist Convention U.S.A. Inc. Foreign Mission Board.

One of the soldiers whom they called "Lewis" was especially good to me, and gave me the first pair of trousers I had ever worn.

Up to this time I had no name. I had never been called anything but "Nig". The need for a name developed when, soon after we entered the camp, a good lady named Miss Mary E. Reeves from Newark, Ohio arrived and opened a school for the "contraband chillun", as we were called, in an empty barrack.

Gathering us around her, Miss Reeves explained to us that she must enroll each child's name. When she came to me, I hated to tell her that my name was "Nigger". I remembered the soldier who had given me the pants, and I told Miss Reeves that my name was Lewis.

"Lewis what?" she asked.

My little mind, like a rosebud grown in the shade, worked slowly, but I finally remembered another soldier named Jordan.

I was put down as Lewis Jordan.

The next day she called the roll. When she called Lewis Jordan no one responded. When all the children looked around for the boy I looked around too. I had

completely forgotten.

The thoughtful lady remembered me. Looking me straight in the eye, she said, "Isn't your name Lewis Jordan?"

Like a flash I answered, "Present!"

At the beginning our teacher spent quite a little time teaching us such simple religious phrases as "Jesus loves me"... Such words I had never heard before; oh! the effect on my child's heart can never be described.²⁰

The tasks which were assigned denied personhood, as persons only took the place of machines. Imagine a small boy having to substitute for what today would be called an electric fan. Or worse than that to stand and do nothing, and therefore be nothing. This was the experience of young Austin Steward who later became the first vice president of the first major Black national movement under the renowned Richard Allen.

When I was not employed as an errand-boy, it was my duty to stand behind my master's chair, which was sometimes the whole day, never being allowed to sit in his presence. Indeed, no slave is ever allowed to sit down in the presence of their master or mistress.²¹

Perhaps the most commonly-known dehumanization was the utter failure to recognize the existence and sacredness of slave family relationships. The illustration which follows is only one of the thousands easily available.

This act created an open rupture with our family - each member felt the deep insult that had been inflicted

²⁰Owen D. Pelt and Ralph Lee Smith, The Story of The National Baptists (New York: Vantage Press, 1960), p. 76.

²¹Austin Steward, p. 18.

upon our head; the spirit of the whole family was raised; we talked of it in our nightly gatherings, and showed it in our daily melancholy aspect. The oppressor saw this, and with the heartlessness that was in keeping with the first insult, commenced a series of tauntings, threatenings, and insinuations, with a view to crush the spirit of the whole family.²²

There was a strong sense of family. Sacrifices of all kinds were made when men and women were sold away from their children or their husbands or wives. Untold numbers of slaves were willing to get up "before day" to get to the fields where they worked, in order to spend the night with their families on other plantations.²³ Masters unashamedly and mercilessly sold their slaves, irresponsive to the slaves' pleas for some consideration.

Josiah Hensen reports in his autobiography such an instance.

There was no longer any disguise about the disposition which was to be made of me... With tears and groans I besought him not to sell me away from my wife and children.²⁴

Cruel white masters exploited attractive slave women and today there remains evidence in the wide variety of complexions among Blacks as a result of sexual aggression.

²²William Loren Katz (ed.) Five Slave Narratives (New York: Arno/New York Times, 1969), p.7.

²³Fisk University, XVIII

²⁴Josiah Hensen, The Autobiography of The Reverend Josiah Hensen, (1858; reprinted., Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1969), p. 55.

The most concrete evidence of the treatment of slaves as cattle was the arbitrary breeding of strong and healthy male "stock" with strong and healthy female "stock." The worst illustration encountered in this research of this widespread and well documented practice is the one that follows:

On this plantation were more than 100 slaves who were mated indiscriminately and without any regard for family unions. If their master thought that a certain man and woman might have strong, healthy offspring, he forced them to have sexual relation, even though they were married to other slaves. If there seemed to be any slight reluctance on the part of either of the unfortunate ones "Big Jim" would make them consummate this relationship in his presence. He used the same procedure if he thought a certain couple was not producing children fast enough. He enjoyed these orgies very much and often entertained his friends in this manner; quite often he and his guests would engage in these debaucheries, choosing for themselves the prettiest of the young women. Sometimes they forced the unhappy husbands and lovers of their victims to look on.²⁵

In such a brutal and heartless environment, helpless captives of African descent cherished and celebrated their limited opportunities of relations, expression and communication, including worship. Every non-hostile word weighed heavily in their psychic formation and survival. The hunger for sensitivity and human tenderness was at least as great as the hunger for food, even among the very young. The insistence on some ultimate meaning in a divine plan simply would not be

²⁵Rawick, XVII, 127.

denied. Mary Reynolds of Texas remembered such a search in her old age:

We was scart of Solomon and his whip, though, and he didn't like frolickin'. He didn't like us niggers to pray, either. We never heard of no church, but us have prayin' in the cabins. We'd set on the floor and pray with our heads down low and sing low, but if Solomon heared he'd come and beat on the wall with the stock of his whip. He'd say, "I'll come in there and tear the hides off your backs". But some the old niggers tell us we got to pray to Gawd that he don't think different of the blacks and whites. I know that Solomon is burnin' in hell today, and it pleasures me to know it.²⁶

The Reverend W. B. Allen, an ex-slave from Columbus, Georgia, expressed his sensitivity to the meaning of prayer in this report of an encounter with his slave master:

I learned to pray when very young and kept it up even in my unsaved days. My white master's folks knew me to be a praying boy, and asked me - in 1865 - when the South was about whipped and General Wilson was headed our way - - - to pray to God to hold the Yankees back ... But I told my white folks straight-from-the-shoulder that I could not pray along those lines. I told them flat-footedly that, while I loved them and would do reasonable praying for them, I could not pray against my conscience: that I not only wanted to be free, but that I wanted to see all the Negroes freed!²⁷

Worship experiences, involving prayer of many types, were engaging and therapeutic to those enslaved. Private prayer, as well as corporate and public utterances, were made for and in behalf of freedom. Children were taught this crucial means of psychic survival as expressed in the

²⁶Rawick, V:4, 240.

²⁷Rawick, XII:1, 12-13.

following:

I can remember how my mother used to pray out in the field. We'd be pickin' cotton. She would go off out there in the ditch a little ways. It wouldn't be far, and I would listen to her. She would say to me: "Pray, son", and I would say, "Mother, I don't know how to pray", and she would say, "Well just say Lord, have mercy". That gave me religious inclinations. I cultivated religion from that time on. I would try to pray and finally I learned. One day I was out in the field and it was pouring down rain, and I was standing up with tears in my eyes trying to pray as she taught me to.²⁸

Recorded in the slave narratives was the strange incident about an enslaved woman who psychically supported one of her slave sisters and all but changed the atmosphere for all slaves, at least in that location.

Irene says, one day a crowd of women were hoeing in the field and the overseer rode along and struck one of the women across the back with the whip, and the one nearest her spoke and said that if he ever struck her like that, it would be the day he or she would die. The overseer heard the remark and the first opportunity he got, he rode by the woman and struck her with the whip and started to ride on. The woman was hoeing at the time, she whirled around, struck the overseer on his head with the hoe, knocking him from his horse, she pounced upon him and chopped his head off...she killed the horse, She then calmly went to tell the master of the murder, saying "I've done killed the overseer."... Without hesitating, the master pointing to one of his small cabins on the plantation said - "You see that house over there? ... Well...take all your belongings and move into that house and you are free from this day and if the mistress wants you to do anything for her, do it if you want to."²⁹

Not only did this become an assertion of her own human

²⁸Rawick, X:6, 271.

²⁹Rawick, XVII, 76.

dignity but it was also an act of support for the psychic survival of a fellow sufferer. Indeed, the story is told with such vividness because it became a means of psychic support and survival for all who heard it.

Charity Moore let the cat out of the bag so far as the importance of the oral tradition for nourishment of psychic survival is concerned. In her mid-1930's report she let slip, "White folks, my Pa had Bible tales he never told de white chillun."³⁰ What she meant was that her father was a regular "Uncle Remus" and an extremely entertaining raconteur, but he was well aware of the power of an oral tradition to nourish identity. The result was that those things which nourished Black identity were kept a secret from whites, for fear the tales would be banned. He was under no illusions. He cherished and carefully used his "best" stories for the Black chillun. "The parents essential and fundamental purpose, beyond assuring the child's survival, is to provide an interpretation of society to the child."³¹

Go back to Africa and capture the intrinsic value of the child, unlike the child in Western culture, who is considered the "least of these." The child of African

³⁰Rawick, III:3, 205.

³¹William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, Black Rage (New York: Basic Books, 1968), p. 69.

descent, even in slavery and with all the problems of paternity, was uniformly welcomed into the world as the chief of blessings. In the earliest years, his psychic wholeness and self acceptance were guaranteed. Persons in slave situations, when used as "breeders," still expressed genuine love for their children. Regardless of their variety - multi-colored, multi-fathered - they were still loved. It is apparent that there is little damage to the the psyche of a Black American child from being unwelcome. No matter how poor or how incapable of child-rearing a Black mother may be, she will seldom put her baby up for adoption. Often when you see a Black baby up for adoption, the mother is other than Black. Culturally speaking there is caring and sharing from the very beginning.

Skill-Keys To Freedom

One of the miracles of the late slavery period and the early Reconstruction Era was the fantastic rapidity with which freedmen seemed to learn skills in 'readin', 'ritin', and 'rithmetic'. Formal instruction was certainly not ideal; and this applied not only to the methods and materials used, but to the relatively small number of persons engaged in this extensive instructional task. The key to this learning miracle was in the extremely high motivation of the pupils. The average adult ex-slave came into the so-called emancipation period with a very strong

notion that the three R's were the key to freedom.

Most Black children in the era prior to the Civil War were taught this same high estimate of these basic, if often inaccessible, skills. There are many, many instances of the learning of reading and writing or the alphabet or some aspect of the skills from what would appear to have been very limited opportunities to teach on the part of parents and others, as indicated in an earlier quote (M mother...had little time etc.). Washington's childhood experience further stresses the point:

I had no schooling whatever while I was a slave, though I remember on several occasions I went as far as the schoolhouse door with one of my young mistresses to carry her books.³²

The slave narratives abound in illustrations such as C. T. Walker learning to read and write before he was eight years old, at which time his mother died. It was apparently extremely well used. The effectiveness of her effort was not hurt at all by what turned out in later years to be the literal genius of her preacher-student. Dr. C. T. Walker became the best known Black preacher in America around the turn of the century. He was regarded by no less a scholar than Carter G. Woodson as "probably the greatest preacher of power developed during the second

³²Washington, p. 18.

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generation of freedom."

Dr. Walker was a close confidant of people like John D. Rockefeller I, who frequented the great Tabernacle Baptist Church in Augusta, Georgia where Walker was pastor. Dr. Walker manifested outstanding leadership ability in his brief pastorate at Mount Olivet Baptist Church in New York City, when he was able to raise the large sum of money for construction of the new Harlem Young Men's Christian Association.

The implications of how much motivation for learning stemmed from the awareness of not being free, and the function of learning in liberation, is implied in the letter of the great abolitionist, Wendell Phillips, to the young Frederick Douglass. The crucial recognition is that awareness of not being free preceded the heroic effort to learn. Three quotes tell the story:

I was glad to learn, in your story, how early the most neglected of God's children awaken to a sense of their rights, and of the injustice done them. Experience is a keen teacher, and long before you had mastered your A B C's, or knew where the "white sails" of the Chesapeake were bound, you began, I see, to gauge the wretchedness of the slave.³⁴

I always took my book with me, and by going one part of of my errand quickly, I found time to get a lesson

³³Carter G. Woodson, The History of the Negro Church (Washington, D. C.: Associated, 1921), p. 222.

³⁴Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass An American Slave (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 18

before my return... This bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins (white children in our neighborhood), who in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge.³⁵

I succeeded in creating in them a strong desire to learn how to read... They very soon mustered up some old spelling books,...I agreed to do so and...devoted my Sundays to teaching these my loved fellow-slaves how to read the gospel of the Son of God.³⁶

Thus did Douglass teach a class of his fellow Methodist youth to read and write on the Sabbath. They did not study the Bible from oral tradition, they learned how to read it first. They were studying ~~religion~~ but at the same time learning the skills so desperately needed for their freedom.

There were numerous isolated instances of the value of the 3 R's as key to freedom even within slavery. Moriah Robinson, born in the mid 1840's, was proud of the fact that her slave husband, "Peter could read and write de plain hand and he gets to haul lumber from Waco to make De Bosque County court house."³⁷

Escape from states like Mississippi and Texas, where the Robinsons lived, was virtually impossible. The closest thing to freedom was not status as house servants, but that of a person free to hire out his time, or free to be away from the plantation and on his own. It was not

³⁵Douglass, p. 65. ³⁶Douglass, p. 113.

³⁷Rawick, V, 254.

It was not difficult for more restricted slaves to see the value of reading in Peter's additional freedom of movement.

The slaves were not given any formal education, however, Mullen's master was not as rigid as some of the slaveholders in prohibiting the slaves from learning to read and write. Mrs. Snellings, the mistress, taught Mack's mother to read and write a little, and Mr. Snellings also taught Mack's father to read, write and figure. Having learned a little they would in turn impart their knowledge to their fellow slaves.³⁸

Once a fellow slave had learned about this, the information entered the Black underground and travelled remarkably well, creating motivation as well as using it. Slaves had also learned how essential the 3 R's were for liberation, from the importance attached to preventing them from getting it. Even the masters who were liberal enough to permit instruction were subject to censure and, at times, to arrest and convictions. Arnold Gragston, born in 1840, remembered very clearly the jeopardy of his master, and for a very good reason.

...he used to have a special slave (Sandy Davis) who didn't have nothin to do but teach the rest of us... we had about ten (slaves) on the plantation, and a lot on the other plantations near us...how to read and write and figger. But sometimes when he would send for us and we would be a long time comin', he would ask us where we had been. If we told him we had been learnin' to read, he would near beat the daylights out of us...after gettin' somebody to teach us; I think he did some of that so that the others wouldn't say he was spoilin' his slaves.³⁹

A Virginia slave owner of some apparently deep

³⁸Rawick, XVII, 238. ³⁹Rawick, XVII, 147.

religious concerns was convicted of breaking "God's law" by teaching a slave how to read the Bible.

She was sentenced to a month in the county jail. The indictment read: Margaret Douglass...did teach a certain black girl named Kate to read in the Bible, to the great displeasure of Almighty God, to the pernicious example of others in like case offending, contrary to the form of the statute in such case made and provided, and against the peace and dignity of the Commonwealth of Virginia.⁴⁰

The larger portion of the evidence, however, indicates that the chief source of the hunger for reading, 'ritin' and 'rithmetic came from the oral tradition. Parents and othe significantly helpful adults in the life of the enslaved child communicated a well nigh religious zeal for learning.

The search for a now inapplicable element in slave learning is surely not ended when one reviews the "3 R's as key to freedom." The gap between the average of marketable skills and incomes both inside and outside the Black ghetto is widening. Public schools, trapped in the tradition of white middle-class education, seem powerless now to initiate whole segments of the population into the simple secrets of a technological society. The gate to the ghetto is continuously locked by failure to receive minimal reading, writing and arithmetical skills. What-

⁴⁰William Craft, "Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom," Great Slave Narratives (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 288.

ever the failures of the schools, their only way out may lie in the nuclear or extended family which teaches a hunger for knowledge.

Oral Tradition

The four elements in the learning processes of the slave child, thus far, have been somber to say the least. The fifth and final element is quite the reverse, for the oral tradition tended to have far more happy and celebrative moments and occasions than sad ones. There were, of course, wise sayings of the grimmest significance. But the portion of the tales and proverbs which were most likely to be retained by the child would have been the lively, humorous stories. Whatever their serious significance, their recall and performance were the occasions of real joy.

In addition to the, perhaps, greater appeal of the joyous, (the idea that the impact of the dead serious and grim was no doubt greater in survival under seige) the livelier tales tended to be performed and heard in much larger circles. There was a sense in which they were recreational along with being instructive. There was also a sense in which the serious advice came from a narrower circle of relatives in contrast to the wider circle in the extended family. In effect, the oral tradition that received more repetition and more mileage was the joyous,

celebrative material.

This final element in the effectiveness of nurture under the handicaps of slavery would appear to boil down to the pedagogical advantage of a lively oral tradition. It translated the most profound world view into understandable, graphic and, indeed, appealing folk images and tales.

The source most depended upon for the understanding of the nurture of the enslaved people of African descent has been slave narratives. However, it has not been common that those who recorded the narratives were particularly interested in such things as the folk tales. The questions and queries were about cures and remedies and other exotic things. These happened to be of greater interest to the interviewer than to the slave and certainly of far less permanent significance. It is therefore necessary to go to other sources for the rich folk tale heritage of Blacks. Perhaps the best known of all of these can be found in the ⁴¹Uncle Remus stories by Joel Chandler Harris.

It is a safe assessment that the above stories were recorded for their simple charm and not at all seriously considered as resources for the training of the young. Yet indoctrination was very likely their chief role in the oral tradition of African society. Varied

⁴¹Joel Chandler Harris, Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings (New York: Meredith Press-Appleton, 1880).

humorous allegories were a comparatively safe means of protest and intracommunication. Stories, anecdotes and folktales included situations and activities employed by the slaves to inch their way along to freedom. It was a snails-pace advance but full of subtle meaning and directed at the more serious aspects of bondage. Even though they were extremely charming and entertaining, in slave society, it is probable that they also had more to do with the nurture and socialization of slave children than perhaps any other single element.

To be sure, Joel Harris was not looking for the tales that bore the greatest theological or even character-building significance. He was largely interested in them for their entertainment qualities. This means that a great deal of what he published may not be representative of the exact kind of character education with which this work is concerned. One is then forced to look between the lines to find some of the more important elements in a field like Christian nurture. Nevertheless, some of the tales which Joel Chandler Harris recorded are very much matched to the very elements of which mention has already been made. For instance, the whole connotation of Brer Rabbit is that of the small powerless person who survives in a world where someone else, namely, Brer Fox, has all the muscle power. Brer Rabbit survives by means of his cunning, and cleverness is precisely what is needed when one is powerless in a

society under seige.

It must be understood, of course, that a great many of the stories that were so popular can be traced back to pre-Christian influence and African soil. There were a great many parallels, however, between African stories and Biblical narratives. An interesting thing is that many of the African stories had different implications altogether. Or maybe they were not so different after all.

For instance, the Uncle Remus version of the flood indicates that the water producing the flood did not come by way of a rainstorm. Rather it oozed from under the ground, and was released in order to drown out the large number of animals in attendance at the "convention." It was a kind of revenge on part of the smaller creatures, such as the crawfish. Something had to be done when the larger animals continuously refused to respond to their protests. This is not entirely unrelated to the flood of the Genesis account. Mankind had refused to hear God's warning against their wicked ways. In that desperately corrupt age, Noah was assigned the task of preserving the lives of all kinds and descriptions of living creatures. Conversely, the animals in Uncle Remus' story were avenging the cruelty of the larger and more powerful animals for purposes of survival. The significance for survival is hardly accidental.

Summary

The final question which must be raised in the face of so strange a set of elements influencing the indoctrination in world view and values of slave children - the real reason for studying slave circumstances at all - is the relevance of the influential elements for the training of children today, especially Black children.

Generally speaking, it has been evident that no one of the five elements discussed above is totally irrelevant to Black experience today. The degrees of applicability will vary, but the so-called Emancipation and the recently enacted civil rights legislation have not overcome the powerful drag of racism, coupled with the influential economic forces which the law has never sought to control. There is still much similarity between the slave quarter and the ever-expanding modern urban ghetto.

For this reason, the element of enforced intimacy is relevant to the understanding and training of every Black child. The character of personal contacts must be carefully weighed, and the church and family must deal with the task of training within the purposefully established intimacy of a supportive family, as opposed to the closeness of a street culture dominated by exploitation.

If residential integration, as enjoyed by a few, appears to provide integrated intimacy and support, let the

parent and extended family beware. Physical proximity is not psychic acceptance, to say nothing of spiritual intimacy. It will usually be wise for parents to return the Black family to the ghetto regularly for the real intimacy which provides psychic support and survival. The Black psyche has to be unrestrictedly and intimately accepted somewhere, and the physical comforts of integrated housing are apt to make the psychic task of the parent much more difficult, both in the development of self-acceptance and in the communication of world view and values. Because of limited acceptance and other typical problems, the writer's family felt it necessary to move back to the ghetto when the children reached the early teen years. From that time on, their psychic wholeness and their education for life took a decided turn for the better.

The current need of Blacks for the psychic nourishment of unrestricted acceptance is at least matched by the need for basic and technical skills. The too-frequent image of learning in ghetto schools as "the white oppressor's way of keeping us out" is dysfunctional in the extreme. The Black family and church have a staggering task in the reclamation of the enslaved ancestors' motivation for obtaining skills and learning of all kinds.

However, the major interest of this work is in the last element, that of the lively oral tradition. In the presence of beguiling and misleading concessions, today's

Black child does not know his besieged status, nor sense his need for liberating mastery of the 3 R's. The values of the first four elements may have to be reclaimed, in many cases, by the lively and impressive art of the fifth. That is to say, the reclamation and enlargement of a Black oral tradition may be a vital means of overcoming low motivation, and of effectively communicating the humane and supportive world view and value system of the African-American tradition. It is to the task of the development of such an oral tradition for today that the next chapter is devoted.

Chapter 4

BLACK NURTURE

Black nurture is the folk process of cultural formation, religious orientation, and ethical influence whereby the masses of Blackamericans have trained their young to cope with oppressed existence and achieve purpose and dignity for their lives. This folk nurture has its roots in the well developed style of cultural formation and transmittal of religious and ethical content in West Africa. The traumatic changes of enslaved life did not succeed in forcing a Black abandonment of the parental training function. Slavery only necessitated the development of creative adaptations of the West African tradition. The new style of Black folk instruction may not be described as wholly unique, but it contrasted sharply with prevailing assumptions about nurture among the white ruling class in several crucial ways.

One obvious contrast involved the virtual absence of printed materials in the process, not by Black intent but by white fear and refusal. As a result, West African dependence on memory was perpetuated both by habit and because access to the highly treasured Bible and to other literature was denied.

Times set aside for formal instruction were also

impossible, necessitating the use of any and all life situations for Black instructional purposes. Here again the contrasting West African tradition was functional. Teaching by conversation in context was the main option available.

A further contrast serves also as the first of three major characteristics which have emerged in the African and slave-era stages of the indoctrination/acculturation process. It is the unshakable assignment of worth to Black children. While this worth is obviously consistent with the Christian tradition in its pure form, the Black assignment constitutes an African based contrast with the practice of slave-holding parents. They were guilty of delegating the responsibilities of child rearing to child loving slaves while they themselves squandered their time on lesser things.

In the Black world, new life is embraced and appreciated wholeheartedly, regardless of handicaps, hard circumstances, or even problems of paternity. The horrors of slavery were not capable of quenching the fondness and intrinsic value lavished on the very young. This is the first prerequisite of the effectiveness of oral tradition or acculturation, since training is a perpetual possibility and an ever-present obligation and need. Only such fondness could motivate the use of the constant opportunities to communicate the wisdom of the foreparents.

The second characteristic which has emerged has been a profound awareness of how important it is for a child to obtain a frame of reference or world view. Whether in Africa or the slave colonies of America, it has been thoroughly understood that the world is too complex to be dealt with de novo. Every child has the need for and the right to the accumulated experience of his foreparents, in the form of their world view and value system. The magnitude of the need for a corpus of belief/wisdom is such that African communication, both in the family and in the community, has been constantly utilized to convey or teach it. The enslaved family had nowhere near as many opportunities to teach, but it has been quite evident that parents and extended family seized every opportunity within their severely restricted lives.

The third characteristic emerging may be said to be a knack for instruction in a situation offering maximal significance and retention - a way of matching need and knowledge, so as to make it unforgettable. Whether in a situation of grim danger to enslaved life, or in a joyous celebration of an African birth or harvest, the lessons offered the beloved Black child have had a context calculated to embed them in consciousness. The learning has not been formal and isolated from life. Rather it has been casual and natural and, in many cases, immediately functional. It has not come from self-conscious pedagogues,

but from concerned kinsmen caught up in the same pressing experience, or enjoying the same celebration.

Old and wise West Africans and Afro-Americans have been respected and held in great veneration, but their authority was not cold, individual or arbitrary. It carried the weight of the group or the family's experience through the years and of their concern for the shared future. The well-reared child has been a credit to his parents, and a means of their immortality, but the child is instructed by a larger circle for larger ends. The lesson is not burdened with the pressure of parental desperation. A child learns the ways of his people for his own safety and fulfillment, and for the welfare of the entire community in addition.

The process of instruction has employed a wide diversity of oral expression. In the effort to recover strengths for the contemporary training of the young, equal variety must be maintained. Therefore the following illustrations of family oral tradition, a family's own communication and celebration, are offered as models of creativity and relevance, rather than specific content and/or method. The purpose is to stimulate a family's or a church's own counterparts of traditional nurture. That is not to say, however, that a particularly appealing tale or other element might not be incorporated into their own folk repertoire.

The work focuses on the actual content of the tradition of Black nurture as it has developed among persons now living. However, this survey is designed to point up the life situations and the manner of communication which rendered the content memorable, indeed unforgettable. In each motif or theme, then, the survey will move from informal conversation through formal teaching to family and church worship and/or ritual. The concluding facet, where such is possible, will be learning as fun and games.

The illustrations offered are organized around themes or motifs, somewhat in the manner of the folklorist. Some of the motifs are expressed in biblical passages, as are a great many of the illustrations. But the most meaningful memories of persons interviewed did not in fact involve scriptural sayings or settings in every case. The basic criteria for the incorporation has to do with the positive impact on the life of the person interviewed. Likewise the purpose for reading the material should be the generation of ideas for use in the acculturation and nurture of children and youth today.

It is, of course, true that a great deal of the most effective material is not traceable in memory to any particular conversation or situation. "My folks taught me" frequently involves a wisdom for which there is no identifiable beginning.

My mother and father were examples of strong faith in God. They were sober, self-respecting,...had pity for the fallen, sympathy for the poor, the unfortunate, the sick and the troubled... My mother gave each of us children what might be called the rudiments in the basic education of her day in spite of her own limitations. My parents sought neither place nor favor; they offered no bribe; they strove to live and lead an upright and godly life; they taught us to be self-respecting and to regard the rights of others. A constant reminder in our home was, Even a man in the ditch is entitled to your respect.¹

This testimony to the teaching of W. H. R. Powell's parents could be multiplied many times. The majority of the world view of those interviewed would be equally the result of an indoctrination which was constant and prolonged. In fact, the system of belief and values was perhaps "caught" even more from the parents' daily and undramatic decisions. But now and then a great idea, lived by all along, leaped to special life because of a particular experience. These experiences provide the proposed guidelines for a kind of constant and situation-oriented instruction - a religio-cultural indoctrination in context.

And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates. (Deuteronomy 6:6-9)

¹W. H. R. Powell, Illustrations from a Supervised Life (Philadelphia: Continental Press, 1968), p. 21.

THE TRUST MOTIF--THE GOODNESS OF GOD

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want
(Ps. 23:1.)

Nothing is more important to the well-being of a child or an adult than the development of trust levels. The very first months of life provide a basis for trust or mistrust in the reliability of the world and whoever is running it. The child who is adored and whose needs are anticipated has an important head start trust-wise. Every person needs subsequently to formulate and articulate this trust. Thus the verbalizations of faith by parents are particularly meaningful and strengthening to the child is a crisis situation.

I was seven years old. That night I went to bed early because I was very tired. My brothers said like they always did, "Ma, fix up Susie so we can carry her to the Point." I was so tired that night I couldn't rest. [Even after we came back to the house] I kept dreaming of the launches that pulled up to the point and the fish and shrimps they unloaded. All of a sudden [still in my dream] a large hook got in my hand and I [woke up and] ran to Ma's room screaming. She held me tight in her arms and said, "Susie, don't be afraid. God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble." I'll never forget that 'till the day I die. (Psalm 46:1)

My sister was dying of spinal meningitis. She was maybe nine or ten years old, and I was a little younger. But I was the one who was selected to look after her. We were all shaken up and taking it pretty hard. But my mother and father kept telling my sister and all of

us, "I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you." Somehow that seemed to be a balm to us. It helped us all know that it wasn't going to be more than we could stand. I still remember it like it was yesterday, and when my own so died it came fresh to my memory and helped me again. (John 14:18)

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Grandpa was ninety-two, and he was supposed to be dying in the hospital. Mama said, "Read him his favorite Psalm." And Daddy read the One Hundred Third Psalm. Grandpa had had a stroke, and he couldn't talk, but he beat my Daddy fixing his mouth to say the words. There he was supposed to be dying, and instead he was smiling and trying to say, "Bless the Lord, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name." I reckon I'll never get over how that got to me. He didn't die then, though. He lived a couple of more years.

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My Dad was a preacher, but he didn't make very much money. He had a good education, too. One time he had some people offering him jobs, and we kids found out about it. We all asked him why he didn't take one of those good-paying jobs, but he said God didn't tell him to. When we said God didn't mind and we needed the money, he asked us, "What do you need that you don't have? What did you ever need that you didn't get? Do you know anybody at your school who is getting a better education or has been around more than you? The only thing you haven't got is some money to jingle in your jeans, and you don't really need that." We never jumped him about his salary again. And lots of times since I've been grown I have wished I could be sure to give my family what he gave us, just by trusting God to provide. That includes a college education.

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Jimmy was terror-stricken in a dark room. Trust levels were so low that, at age five, he had to sleep with a light on. His mother decided that he was too old for this, so she turned out the light and told him to go to sleep anyway. But every night she did that he would climb right out of his bed and get into hers. One night his mother asked him, "Jimmy, how can you sleep in here when there's no light on?" He said, "Because you're in here." She said, "But who's going

to take care of me in this dark?" Jimmy couldn't answer that one. Then she said, "I'll tell you who takes care of me, it's God. And darkness and light are both alike to him. He sees just as well in one as the other. So he takes care of me just as well at night as he does in the day." Then she and Jimmy talked about how they had had a happy life, and they thanked God together for taking care of them. When Jimmy's mother carried him and put him in his own bed, they asked God to keep on caring for him just like he had been doing all along. Jimmy has been sleeping without the light ever since. (Psalm 139:12)

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As far back as I can remember, I was deathly scared of the dark. My mother never fussed about it, but she always turned off the lights after I had gone to sleep. She used to, sometimes, try to talk me out of it. One night she sang a song about God and the darkness and the light. I tried to learn to sing the song, but I fell asleep. After this happened a few times, I got to where I could sing the song by myself and go to sleep in the dark. (Psalm 139:12)

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Our parents always taught us to thank God for all good things that we received. At our family prayer time each one of us would take our turn thanking God for what we liked about that day. My little brother used to thank God for food about a dozen times each night. But one day he had a great time digging in the dirt and playing with worms for the first time. That night he kept repeating "Thank you, God, for worms." And he really meant it.

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THE JUSTICE MOTIF

Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.
(Gal. 6:7.)

Children need to know that the universe and its

Creator are just. The first prerequisite to their acceptance of high principles and ethical values is their certainty that the rules apply equally to all people, and that they change not. The young can trust life if they can believe that it is fair with them. Few things are more shattering to a child or a youth than the major cruelties inflicted upon them which appear to go unpunished or without redress. Adult slaves conferred meaning on their own and their children's lives by the developing and narrating of a collection of tales such as the first one that follows, taken from the life of Sojourner Truth.

At the sight of her son's scarred and beaten body Sojourner Truth exclaimed, "Heavens! What is all this? When Pete responded that it was the result of the cruelty of his illegal master, she cried out, "O, Lord Jesus, look! See my poor child! Oh Lord, "render unto them double' for all this!"

She later learned that this same master had brutally murdered his own wife and in one short day made of his children "more than orphans." "She thought she saw clearly, that their unnatural bereavement was a blow dealt to exalt or rejoice over them. She felt as if God had more than answered her petition, when she ejaculated, in her anguish of mind, 'Oh, Lord, render unto them double!' She said, 'I dared not find fault with God, exactly; but the language of my heart was, Oh, my God! that's too much - I did not mean quite so much, God!'²

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My folks told me that a lie will always come back to the person who told it. There will always be trouble, and it will be harder than if you had told the

²Sojourner Truth, Narrative of Sojourner Truth (Chicago: Johnson, 1970), pp. 38-41.

truth.--One day we were playing marbles. I had a ball bearing the size of a marble, and I knocked four marbles out of the ring, on my first shot. The boys tried to make me put all the marbles back, because we had a rule against steelies. They chipped the marbles, and sometimes they even broke them. But I lied and said I never heard of no such a rule. I kept on using my steelie, because they weren't big enough to make me quit. All of a sudden I noticed that they were getting more out of the pot than I was. What happened was one boy had a steelie too, and he let the other three use it. I lost a bunch of marbles that day, and I remembered what my folks had said about lies coming back to you.

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I had heard for years about the fun and pranks at scout camp. Now I was almost twelve, and a member of a brand new troop. And we were out on our very first overnight trip. We were all so excited that nobody went to sleep except my Dad, who was our leader. About one A. M. three boys and I sneaked over to the mess tent and got a piece of boiled potato and a box of pepper. We put all the pepper we could on the potato and layed it under Pop's nose. We all climbed back into our sleeping bags and played like we were asleep.

We just about died laughing when Pop woke up sneezing his head off. He brushed the pepper off his pillow and went on back to sleep without saying a word.

Hardly two days later, somebody played some kind of a prank on me. I don't even remember what it was, but I sure was crying. When I went to Pop to complain, he just laughed and waved his finger and his head at the same time. And he said, "Son, be not deceived; God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap."

For sure, I'll never forget that day. When I heard Sam Irvin quote that passage in the Watergate hearing, I got a big lump in my throat.

THE GRACE AND FORGIVENESS MOTIF

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our

sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our
sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.
(1 John 1:8-9.)

Every child needs to know that he is accepted
without condition. The love showered on the child can
never be earned. It is the subtle hint at conditioned
approval that sows the seed of life-long neurosis. Parents
must exemplify grace and forgiveness so that children can
visualize and accept the grace and forgiveness of God.

Tommy, my oldest brother, was so wild. He ran
away from home when he was fifteen. Mama never gave
him up. She was always looking to hear from him or to
see him. One day he came home, quite to our surprise.
We were very glad to see him, but I can remember Sue
saying, "How come Mama treats him so good when he been
so wrong and so wild?" We grumbled so much Mama made
us sit down, and she told us the story of the Prodigal
Son right then and there. You can just imagine how bad
that made Sue feel. I felt kinda bad too. (Luke 15:
11-32)

Mama was in the hospital. She had had an opera-
tion. It was getting along alright, but she was
bloated up with gas. Oh, but she was in pain! It was
partly because somebody had given her the wrong tray
the night before. While I was visiting her the next
day, they brought her the wrong food again. She knew
better than to eat it this time. I was kind of mad at
the nurse, but Mama said, "The Bible says ain't nobody
perfect. God forgives us, and we got to forgive other
people." I was a little bit ashamed when she acted so
sweet, even with all that hurting. (Luke 18:19)

I wanted to be baptized, and I was seeking, as the
custom was. I couldn't sleep at night for worrying.
One night my spiritual mother asked me what I was
worrying about. Had I ever hurt or done wrong to

anybody? I thought about it for several days, and then I remembered a while back there was a little kitten sitting on the pump. The kitten started to run away and I pushed it down in the water. We weren't using it any more. It was too far down to get out, and it drowned. For a while, every day when I would walk to school or to Mother Judy's, I'd imagine that kitten was laying across my path. When I told Mother Judy about it, she said, "Chile, you'll never find God 'til you get rid of that kitten. You shouldn't harm any of God's creatures that doesn't harm you. Ask the Lord to forgive you, chile, and sure enough he will." Then she prayed those words I hadn't paid much attention to before. They were from the Lord's Prayer. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Somehow I felt forgiveness from that moment on. So I went on through and I was baptized. (Matt. 6:12)

THE MOTIF OF LOVE

Let us love one another. I John 4:7.

Love is the greatest index to children's growth, and yet it is the least subject to direct verbal influence. Perhaps this is why God showed his love in the person, Jesus. Nevertheless, there are times when a well placed word weighs significantly in the establishment of creative care and loving relationships.

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There were fourteen children in our family. Mama took in sewing and Papa was a wood cutter. There was hardly enough of anything to go around. As far back as I can remember my parents convinced us that the only way we could manage with what we had was to love one another. I can hear Mama now saying, "Little children, love one another."

Sometimes one of us would be mean and the rest of us would want to punish him by not sharing. Then Papa would tell my favorite Bible story about Joseph and his brothers. Papa said, "They did him wrong, but he did

not hold it against them. When they needed him he helped to supply food." (Genesis 39-46)

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I was real little for my age--a shrimp of a kid. Somebody was always picking on me. One day when I was about eleven I decided to stop this business. When a boy named Whiskey started picking on me, I hit him in the mouth, just as hard as I could. He looked real surprised, but all of a sudden I felt the worst blow I can ever remember, up side my jaw. I couldn't chew any food for about three weeks.

I ran home mad and crying. My Ma tried to comfort me, but all I wanted to do was to get my brothers and go after that guy. My mother reminded me that Whiskey had more brothers than I did, and that wouldn't be any help. Then she said the best way was for me and him to be friends. I don't know why, but it really impressed me when she told me, "Love your enemies. Do good to them that despitefully use you." The next time I saw Whiskey I acted like nothing had ever happened, and he did too. Somehow after that we were the best of friends. I wish I could know where he is right now. (Matthew 5:44)

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I had a sister younger and one older that used to tease and hit me a lot. I was chubby and clumsy and a funny looking kid anyway. And I never fought back. Some way, somehow, Papa had impressed on me the idea that a soft answer turns away wrath.

After school one day we were playing under the house [on high pillars because of frequent flood waters] and my little sister pulled my pigtail real hard. When I wouldn't fight back, she bit me on my arm. I ran to Papa and told him, "Look what your soft answer got me." "Never mind," he said, "she'll get it back one day. She's your little sister, and you'll have to keep on loving her. And one of these days she has to grow up to be like you." He made me feel grown up, and I decided not to give up. I still can't give a hard answer. (Proverbs 15:1)

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READINESS AND RESOURCEFULNESS MOTIF

Be ye also ready, for ye know not the day nor the hour. (Oral traditional rendition of Matthew 24:44 & Mark 13:35.)

Persons born under oppression must learn early to expect the worst and respond resourcefully. They are not in the literal state of siege which prevailed during slavery, but life is constantly threatened, and resources seem never to be adequate. Wise parents train their children to be alert at all times, and to be careful and creative in the use of all that they have.

I remember the night we forgot to fix the lamps. The man at the corner store was out of oil. That night a big storm came up, and we had to go to bed early, because we didn't have any candles. Mama came up to our room and stood there in the dark and told us the story of the five wise and five foolish virgins. She put special emphasis on the shut door and the man telling them that he didn't even know them. Then Mama said, "Be ye also ready, for ye know not the day nor the hour." It was worse than a whipping. (Matthew 25:1-13)

Daddy preached a sermon on the importance of little things, and not throwing away anything God gives you. I don't remember exactly his text, but he talked about his tool chest, and I surely remember that. He said that he never threw away anything. He kept everything God gave him, and whatever he needed was always there. He wasn't lying, either, like a lot of preachers do. He was always finding nuts and bolts and little things like that, and putting them in his little tool box. The very next day I showed him my brother's truck axle, and I "bet" his tool box didn't have a fixit for that. He said I might be right, but he ought to look at least.

We dug all the way to the bottom, and lo and behold there were two bolts just the right length. They made better axles than the truck had when it was new.

My Daddy still has that tool box, and we both expect it to have whatever he needs to fix anything. I find myself throwing nothing away either. And I enjoy using little things I have saved much more than things I could go out and buy. I can't help being careful about little things. Sometimes I find they are very important both materially and spiritually.

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After the war [World War I] so many of our people moved to _____ that the white folks decided to put as many as they could in one school. The new district was the funniest thing you ever saw. The line would zig and zag just to get one Negro out of the rich folks' elementary school. Because I was in the sixth grade, they let me stay, but they made my two brothers go to the segregated elementary.

My mother went down to the principal's office the day my brothers were supposed to transfer and raised sand with principal. She [the principal] took off her pinch-nosed glasses and looked all horrified at my Mom, talking about "Mrs. _____, I'm surprised at you." I guess she really was, because my Mom had been to all the meetings and she was bound we were going to be good boys. My Mom advanced on the principal with her hands on her hips and said, "Well you needn't be. I neither slumber nor sleep when I'm dealing with you white folks." We brothers were kinda proud of her. (Psalm 121:4)

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We lived way out in the country and my papa collected junk. The church we went to needed an organ. So one day my papa found one that an old lady was giving away. Nobody in the church could play and one Sunday I tried. Oh! what a surprise when I found I had an ear - I could play. That day my father told me the parable about the men with the talents. Then he said, "Susie, if you have a talent don't dig a hole and hide it."

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Dad and I were out church calling. He was riding

his bike and I had my pillow across the bar, the favorite spot where I used to ride. As we passed cousin Mose's house he called to us: "Light a spell, and have some cool lemonade and maybe break some bread." Well, I was sure he meant breaking of a loaf of bread. Just how was it that it would take several people to "break it." For all these years, I have remembered that day everytime I hear: "Let us break bread together."

THE PROVIDENCE MOTIF

We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28; Common Bible)

As adolescents become aware of the complexities of life, the simple trust in the goodness of God seems inadequate at times. It is then that persons need reassurance that God has provided for his own despite the inexplorable catastrophes and the evil uses of human freedom. In the providence of God the most trying circumstances cannot alter life's basic thrust for good. In Africa and in America, Black parents have helped their children move from the despairing question of whether any good could possibly come out of a bitter experience, to the question of curious faith as to which of his mysterious ways God would use to bring good out of this particular evil.

Pop had been sick for three months and he just went back to work to help in the Christmas rush. Us kids

were not used to big Christmases, really, but we knew very well that this one would be the smallest ever. We had seen our Daddy so close to death that we were glad enough just to have him with us.

Our folks had not said that we weren't going to get anything for Christmas, but we could tell by the scrawny tree and the sad faces. Nevertheless we made the usual trip to the tree early Christmas morning. Imagine our surprise to find presents about as good as ever! Between our aunt and some folks on Pop's mail route there were lots of things. That's when we got our first skates. When our screams had died down we noticed our Dad crying a little. And we'll never forget what he said: "I once was young, and now I am old, and never have I seen the righteous forsaken nor his seed begging bread." (Psalm 37:25)

I was blasting stumps for a road for the log trucks. I waited a long time for one charge to go off. Finally I guessed it was either dead or hooked up wrong, so I came from behind the tree to see about it. Just when I got to the stump, it blew up, and I woke up in the hospital, blind in both eyes.

It was an awful feeling. I couldn't imagine why God would let that happen to me, when I was doing my best to be a faithful Christian. I even tithed, and did a lot of witnessing. That question bothered me so bad I couldn't sleep. You might even say I was a little mad at God.

One day I called a preacher friend of mine long distance and put my question to him. He didn't say anything for a while, but I'll never forget what he did say when he started talking. I have been living by it ever since. He said, "Mr. _____, I don't have any easy answers, but this one thing I do know. In everything God works for good with those who acknowledge his call. I've got as many questions as you have, but mine are different. You are asking if God can bring any good out of this, and demanding that he show it to you right now. I know he's going to bring good, but I'm sure curious to see how."

TRADITION BY CHILDREN FOR ADULTS

And a little child shall lead them. Isaiah 11;6.

Fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: and bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. (Ephesians 6:4.)

The learning process is not a one-way street from the parent to the child. Children sometime teach their parents and other adults. Every parent needs to develop greater sensitivity to the signals of children, both when they are willing and able to take initiative, and when they indicate their own deep convictions about parental errors.

I remember when my father came home one night. Ma said to him, "Emma done pass you." I said, "Papa, I done found the Lord, or he done found me, one or the other." Papa said, "Now, my chile, the strength of my back-bone found the Lord before me." I couldn't understand him. How could I be the strength of his back-bone?--It took me six months to find the Lord, but after that it only took him three weeks. We was baptized in the same service. I was nine and he was about twenty-six.

I wanted to take sacrament, but my Ma said, "You can't get it till you go in the wilderness and seek and be baptized. Then you can get it." We lived near a grave yard and we were supposed to go to this special place to seek. But I was scared. Instead of going to the grave yard, Titter and I went to the fodder house. While I was seeking, Titter watched, because I didn't want anybody to know I was seeking in the wrong place.

One-night Pa watched us going into the fodder house, and he followed us. He thought we were just playing, and weren't supposed to play in there. He was really

surprised when he found out I was seeking and praying. Instead of telling on me he joined me, because he hadn't found the Lord himself then.

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Daddy had taken us up to Glacier Point [Yosemite] early Sunday morning, before he went down to town. We planned to hike down to the valley floor in time for Sunday chapel service. The rough, steep downgrade was harder than we had expected. We weren't much more than half way down by eleven o'clock.

Liz said, "Why don't we just stop here on the ridge and have our own service." Hank just started quoting "The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein." Liz was only about eight, but she chimed right in with, "When through the woods . . . trees; when I look down from lofty mountain grandeur and hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze." Then we all joined in, "Then sings my soul, my Savior God to three: How great thou art! How great thou art!" We were singing with full voices.

There were tears in Mommy's eyes, and Aunt Alta's too. They didn't say anything, so I decided to say some verses. I said, "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills..." and some others. I was only ten, but it was more like real worship than almost any service I was ever in.

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I was about thirteen when I noticed some lumps like muscles on my arms. My younger brother was very much impressed. He thought I had all of a sudden become very strong.

One day my dad accused me of doing something that I knew very well I hadn't done. I told him I hadn't done it, but he wouldn't believe me. He seemed angry, and he announced that he was going to whip me.

It all came to a head in the crowded pantry. I don't know how we got in there or why, but I had my hand on Pop's shoulder, and I was telling him that there might be some fighting that day, but there wasn't going to be any whipping. My silly brother was begging me not to hurt my dad, who outweighed me by forty to fifty pounds. My mother was pleading with my dad that this was no way to settle anything.

I wish I could remember just what Pop said that day. All I remember now is that he became very calm and put his arm around me, and we walked out of the pantry and out of the house, and all the way to the drugstore --just me and Pop. He asked me to forgive him, and then he bought me the first milkshake I had in my life. From that day on I felt so close to my dad that we didn't have another argument for years. When we did get into some debates later on, I was in college and they were about politics, and not family affairs.

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One of my pleasantest memories from boyhood was the Roxabell camp meeting. Grandpa and Grandma never missed. They had non stop preaching, but they almost had non stop eating too. That was the part I liked best. I could eat my way from family to family - from one side of the camp to the other. It was all free except the soft drinks and the cold watermelon slices Grandma's bachelor kid brother sold. All the people were so generous! They almost argued about who would get to feed the folks who had come from far away with no basket. I got so angry and fussed a little when Grams gave away the last drumstick. Oh! did I feel bad when she said, "God gave us all this food, and you done had two chicken legs, and now you don't want Rev. _____ to have even one."

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Grandfather was 100 years old and I was born on his birthday. We planned a surprise party for him and invited a lot of people. The day came and everyone was in a festive mood. When it was time to open the presents I kept seeing things for a small boy - and I wondered - every present was mine - I got the surprise. I didn't know it had been planned that way yet all the while I had heard Gramps saying: It is more blessed to give than to receive."

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CELEBRATION OF LIFE

Blessed are you among women. (Luke 1:42.)

Times when I learned the most and had the deepest feelings? Well, one of them was in - would you believe it - the pediatrician's office. Just after my first menstrual period, on my twelfth birthday visit, Dr. J____ examined me carefully. Then he called Mommy and Daddy in the office and got chairs for all of us to sit and talk. He told us I was doing fine and then he got real serious. He took my hands and looked me straight in the eye and swallowed hard. I thought he was going to cry. With a big lump in his throat he said, "M____ you are growing now to be a woman. Your body is doing a wonderful thing, preparing you for something that can never happen to me or to your Daddy." I was very curious and blurted out why? He said, "Your body will some day be able to form a baby and you can become a mother. I covet that, but I will never be able to have that chance. God has planned that to happen to only your sex. You're lucky to be a girl and I want you to take good care of yourself and be ready when the time comes." I couldn't understand why but Mommy and Daddy were smiling and crying too. I couldn't say a word. I wish I could go back and show Dr. J____ our darling little baby girl. I'm sure a doctor or I will tell her the same thing when the time comes. I can realize now that Dr. J____ made me feel very close to him and to God. As a woman, I am blessed.

BLACK NURTURE IN A SHARING EXPERIENCE

P.: To that nobody's OK bit - then that person is a pessimist - frowns all the time. It makes a whole lot difference which one you belong to, how you get along, how you enjoy life, how you look at it all. You help to give your child a script. Somebody helped to give me one. I'm sure there's a Bible verse...

O.: Romans 8:28 - I know everything is not good like it looks right now, but I figure God's gonna be able to bring something good out of it. He didn't intend for it to happen - life is not a mess, it means something, its going somewhere.

F.: I've seen an awful lot of people with the wrong

script. They're bitter and sometimes sensitive and disturbed.

D.: Maybe their parents gave them the wrong script - and maybe sometimes in a very subtle way.

O.: Sometimes they might have done it by facial expressions - something that's going on all the time. The look in your eyes, the way you hold your mouth - preaching, teaching, brain-washing twenty four hours a day - and sometimes I don't know what my script is saying.

T.: Take me, I frown all the time. Like being with somebody, somebody who talks a lot or some stranger who comes up to me and _____ I know I'm frowning. Like a friend said; "Everytime I say something to you you frown." Well, I don't know - I'm trying to correct it now. But...O basically like I feel, maybe I'll change by trying to change my thoughts.

I don't want no parts of no bitterness, no bitterness of pain, no sadness.

No, I'll show 'em I don't need 'em;

No parts of look what they did to me.

No more I'll show him I aint stupid

None of that I got to be Black to be beautiful

I only got to help my Black brothers and sisters

That's where I belong - - Cause I belong everywhere

I am! I've got my man, my child, my life, my talent, My creativity; a well of thoughts - pleasant ones, miles of happy times.

I've known some beautiful caring people. Not always beautiful, not always sharing, not always caring.

Sometimes needing the same hope and happy for which I searched; but the moments spent are beautiful caring, precious, happy moments. I've got moments!!

I've got my God!! THANK YOU GOD!!

Chapter 5

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSTIONS

Train up a child in the way he should go: and
when he is old he will not depart from it.
(Proverbs 22:6.)

The beginning shape of a child's belief system and ethical values comes inescapably from those who rear the child. Whatever the failures of public or church schools, a great deal, good or bad, will already have been taught and caught at home. Still more will be communicated by the home in the years of youth. The task of the Black church and home, especially, is to recover the best of the traditional patterns of instruction which worked so well for so long under circumstances no less difficult than the challenges of the modern Black ghetto.

Much of this traditional Black nurture process is already either active or dormant in Black culture today. In a way of speaking it is both the wave of the past and the hope of the future. In its own way modern technology has moved the educational process back to spoken words, as opposed to the printed message. In this context the oral tradition may be thought of as the ultimate communication once again.

The West African process of nurture by oral tradition has been examined because it has been and still

is so very successful in the extended family setting. It is also the precursor of the most successful aspects of Blackamerican nurture and indoctrination. In other words, the training pattern that prevailed in West Africa is seen again in the life histories of those best rooted in and strengthened by the Black religious world view.

The powerful influence of African world view came, first of all, from the variety of media in which it was expressed. The wisdom of a proverb was not just frequently spoken in conversation; it was sung, danced, drummed, and often dramatized. The festivals of the culture were not as regular as the Sunday worship of the Western world, but the impact was much deeper. Added to all of the modes of artistic expression was the fact that this wisdom and these assignments of value were normative for the community. The beliefs of the society were not at odds with the practice, and the child was able both to see and to hear the truth.

The culture was saturated with the faith of the West African. Even now, with the encroachments and competition of Euro-American culture and enterprise, the objects of trust and worth have not changed in the minds of the masses of West Africa. The slowness of the rate of change has been constant for centuries, although it may soon change. In the meantime, the current culture has served well as a model for the understanding of the roots of those later enslaved in America.

A second major aspect of African effectiveness in the communication of culture has been the atmosphere of the extended family and the status of the child in it. It has been established that the African child is "spoiled" by Western standards, being almost worshipped and dealt with most permissively. The child learns early to trust her/his world because needs are anticipated. But the child's world is also the child's culture. This gives strong support to the views of the culture, since the child has such a stake in any society which takes him so seriously. The extended family also takes seriously the task of indoctrinating the child in that culture. The respect and deference accorded the child is also accorded every member of the society. Permissiveness is therefore not unilateral, and personhood is respected at every age because it is taught at the beginning.

The African world of wisdom and values is not dour and negative. The atmosphere for learning is celebrative and indeed ecstatic. The beliefs advanced are reinforced by association with pleasant and impressive occasions. Yet the joy is not irrelevant, ecstatic escape from reality. The rules and beliefs of the African society are useful to society as a whole and to the individual in that society. The memorization and practice of the customs and convictions of the forefathers of Blackamericans in Africa is the single most impressive data in the motivation of this study.

The arrival of African captives on American shores signalled a traumatic change in circumstances. Yet the strengths of the cultural heritage did not disappear. The enslaved Black only had to major in that great traditional strength called functional adaptability. With little time to communicate with the young, the brutally dehumanized Black still survived and remained creative, generation after generation. In fact, the lowest point in Black creativity and confidence occurred not during slavery but in the late nineteenth century, after the disappointments and harassments of the post-Reconstruction era.

Slave narratives after slave narratives prove that the Black, unpaid servant had a productive life and faith of her/his own, particularly from sundown to sunup. White masters did not impart the faith to them; they appropriated it on their own, according to their own background and needs. When the slaveocracy finally decided in the early 1800's that Blacks had souls, they had had two centuries to fuse their African and Christian faith sources. Only small parts of this came from the tiny missionary efforts of American "Christianity" prior to 1830. Nevertheless, the faith they had was both Black and Christian, and it was taught with impressive success to generation after generation of Black children.

The effective teaching of the young under such hard circumstances may be traced to several elements. The first

was the enforced intimacy of the slave family/community, with the increased importance of relationships. These warm ties served as the basis for teaching rapport in the largely informal learning situations where so much was received. The lessons learned, however, were not just "religious." They were quite necessary to survival. Trust in God was inseparable from the context of being under seige, and one learned to pray and to resist the enemy simultaneously. The ordinary Black child has no trouble sensing the crucial importance of all that was shared, under whatever casual or informal circumstances.

The very act of communication was itself a means of psychic survival. While Westerners say, "I think, therefore I am," oppressed Blacks might have said, "I speak and one listens, therefore we are." Every single thing the captive did voluntarily had this survival implication, consciously or unconsciously. The efforts to learn to read and write were only a small part of this pattern, but it explains the high volume of largely illegal studying that went on.

A final factor in the effectiveness of the culture communication of slaves was the African survival of the lively oral tradition. The drum was soon outlawed, but nobody could stop them from talking, telling stories, preaching sermons, singing songs, praying, and otherwise making dramatic, impressive use of their African heritage

in a manner bound to teach their own ways as opposed to the ways of the dominant master class.

The themes or motifs of the teachings of the enslaved lived on without interruption in the separate and unequal life of Blackamericans. Many still live whose life style and deep convictions exemplify the strengths of the culture communication of slaves. From a variety of informants from California, Georgia, South Carolina, New York and Ohio the tales and experiences which make up a Black oral tradition were gleaned. The dominant themes were illustrated in far more reports than were possible or even wise to include here. The informants ranged in age from the middle twenties to ninety-four. Only a few were or are of the affluent or highly educated class. Most were elderly and in limited circumstances. The themes of faith in God which lighted their lives also seemed to have something to do with their much higher than average number of highly achieving children.

It was plain that the Christian Bible had largely supplanted the African oral corpus, and some were capable of lengthy and meticulously correct quotations from the King James Version. These were useful, however, in a life agenda established by the Black experience. Nobody needs the justice of God quite like the Black American. The same is true of the providence and grace of God. However, like their African foreparents, their training had been long on

the importance of intelligence, resourcefulness, advance planning and self respect. The various informants' statements are not so much an anthology of selected quality as a collection of available sources whose common character might stimulate the recall of the reader's own family oral tradition. To live through its strength once again is to know that it must not be allowed to die. Indeed, the task of teaching those who are young and Black must be much more seriously addressed and in much the manner of their ancestors if this generation of young is to learn a world view and value system which will support survival in the 1970's.

This study may be stated in the perspective of the classical theological disciplines, even though Black culture does not follow these Western dichotomies. For instance, the whole process of oral tradition is extremely important not only in understanding the development and transmittal of the biblical materials originally, but in the life of the early Christian church. The author has actually studied the varieties of Yoruba traditional texts as a possible model of causes for textual variety in Old Testament sources. The whole Bible was formed before anyone dreamed of mass volume printing. Therefore the oral tradition studied in this work puts the dynamic scriptures back into their proper functioning perspective for the Judeo-Christian tradition, while also continuing and

enhancing the strengths of the Black religious tradition.

It is also true that every one of these folk quotations of the Bible involves serious exegesis and/or folk interpretation. In this sense, this work also speaks concerning theological or doctrinal positions. Every person who teaches in this oral tradition has to have a theological position with reference to the justice, mercy, providence and grace of God. The newly emphasized theme of hope in Western theology is an old pillar of Black belief among an otherwise often hopeless people. The tradition includes no theoretical rationale per se, but hope is caught from one contagious believer to another. It is likely that there is no other way to arrive at a living hope.

Historically speaking, this study amounts to a previously unwritten phase of the history of the Black Church. To date most of Black Church History has fallen into two patterns. One has been to focus on individual leaders of high achievement according to the highest of¹ Western standards, i. e. the work of Carter G. Woodson. The other has been to deal hypercritically with the worship and religious nurture of the Black masses, i. e.,² E. Franklin Frazier.

¹Carter G. Woodson, History of The Negro Church.

²E. Franklin Frazier, Negro Church In America.

This work has searched through thousands of pages of slave narratives for the hidden threads of implied religious belief and nurture. It establishes the real integrity and high belief of unsung millions. As such it also becomes functional Christian educational material for the generating of a new and higher Black self-image, religiously speaking.

In terms of psychological understanding or the concepts of pastoral care, this study is dealing with a deliberate attempt to develop a conscious level culture and an unconscious cultural orientation which, in the main, are not at war with each other. To the extent that much of modern Western education is at odds with an unconscious undertow or trying to outgrow the basic historic roots of the culture, there is unproductive tension. A person is torn between the sometimes very sound feelings and emotions, as well as suspicions and superstitions, of his past, and the so-called enlightened insights of modern academia. This work affirms that the Black unconscious or, as Mbiti³ calls it, the "Instant" religion of Blacks is basically good and relevant even though some unproductive superstitions have yet to be outgrown.

³John S. Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy (New York: Praeger, 1969), p. 275.

This indigenous religion has evolved from an African traditional faith to an African-American Christianity. It has adapted so functionally that it serves this generation well. To the extent that Black-american oral-tradition Christianity has been eroded away, it must be recovered. To the extent that it has been attacked from the Western presupposition base, it must be defended on its own foundations. In this manner the conscious and unconscious religion of Blacks must be returned to harmony and transconscious wholeness, as well as preserved and enhanced. This understanding of human religious integration has far-reaching implications for pastoral care and Christian nurture in all cultures.

Christian nurture or education is the discipline with which this work is chiefly concerned. Its meaning for all Christian education is varied and extensive. It ranges from the recovery of tale telling and impromptu interpretation of life by families to the more effective use of television to teach the faith by means of the lively arts. As Harvey Cox has said, whatever is on the screen is some kind of symbolization of some kind of belief system.⁴ Christians must become sensitive to the unequal time and exposure of today's population to that which is contrary to

⁴Harvey Cox, The Seduction of the Spirit (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), pp. 14, 275.

the Christian faith, building unconscious trust and value systems which are materialistic and pagan. Whether or not the forces of the churches ever get "equal time," the families and churches must make it themselves with their own circuits and, most of all, with their own common life.

The practical implications of this study for Black families and churches can be summarized in a list of essentials of guidelines for those interested in developing an oral tradition in their own families. Churches can give crucial assistance to such families by forming groups which share their learnings in the experiment in the recovery of religious culture and oral tradition. Such groups can also provide motivational reinforcement for the disciplined efforts necessary to revive and maintain the Black religious counter culture. It is the intention of the author to write a resource for parents and parent groups to be published along with the popular revision of the dissertation.

In a preliminary experiment with such a parent group, the original objective was to test the methods implied by the African and earlier Black American experiences in nurture. The major obstacle turned out to be the parents' personal weaknesses in the tradition to be communicated. It was most embarrassing to many that they could casually articulate so little of Black and biblical wisdom. To teach informally in meaningful context was

consequently impossible. What started out as an experiment in methods became a Black Christian growth group for parents seeking a deeper and more relevant contemporary Christian faith and value system.

The first essential, therefore, for recovery of the Black oral tradition is for the parents to work towards a contemporary, practical understanding of the Christian faith from a Black perspective. As the experimental group sought to achieve this recovery the emphasis was placed on scriptural insights which had been loved and quoted by parents, grandparents and other significant persons. There was no effort made to refer to a biblical or theological textbook. The resource persons or teachers sought to reconstruct a Black Christian world view from the oral tradition latent in the memories of the participants.

At the same time the biblical passages and other oral tradition insights discussed were related to the everyday challenges of Black existence. Members of the group were not so much self-consciously preparing to teach as consciously up-grading their own religious and cultural development and preparing to live. The motivation for their own eventual memorization of traditional texts came from the excitement and satisfaction of growth rather than any grim determination to memorize.

This memorization constitutes the second essential

for a family oral tradition. Parents need a repertoire of biblical and other material which can be quoted, mentioned or performed with ease and applied with accuracy and spontaneity. If a parent has not learned such a collection of wise sayings and symbolic stories, this is the very next step after one has begun to seek and define a faith for today. The material learned should be capable of accurately verbalizing one's emerging deep convictions.

In keeping with the understanding that convictions are caught rather than taught, one resource for the development of a repertoire might be a tape library of testimonies about Bible passages and related experiences gathered especially from the elderly and more religiously articulate. In fact, such a collection could be used not only by adults but directly in discussions of young people and even with children. The experimental group, which lasted approximately six months, meeting only on Sundays, did not get around to this stage of the gathering of materials.

A variety of other written materials may be suggested for the development of oral tradition. The whole history of the church and its families needs to be integrated with an emerging biblical repertoire. A record of the death of any member of spiritual stature needs to be taken more seriously than has been common in the Black church. The insistence upon an obituary at funerals, for

instance, ought to be utilized in the development of a Black Church's collection of tradition. Instead of simply "spreading the resolutions of condolence" upon the minutes of the church, additional files of obituaries should be established, each of them with some spiritual focus. The writer's husband did this for years in the parish ministry, carefully writing the obituary himself and trying wherever possible to place in the record the favorite scripture passage of the deceased. The professionally written obituary was then duplicated, filed in the church record, and circulated to all members of the family. The whole purpose was to encourage each family to begin to keep its own set of records and traditions, as well as to focus on favorite scripture passages.

Still another resource in the generating of fluency in the quotation of Bible texts is the writing and presentation of biblical dramas. The writer was involved in Christian educational projects in which even movies were developed and produced by teenagers. A very solid by-product of the effort was the memorization of passages selected from the Bible by the pupil-writers. These were memorized in the process of making the movie. The lighting on the film was so poor that the youth elected not to engage in a public showing. However, the memorization had already been solidly accomplished. One Harlem church where the writer worked in the early 1940's did

succeed in filming an excellent color movie shown frequently in the New York area for several years. The participants were in the ten to fourteen year age group.

Perhaps the best known vehicle for memorization in many devout Black families today is the practice of quoting a passage of scripture before each meal. The prayer is offered by one person; then everyone else is expected, in turn, to quote a "Bible verse" before partaking of any food. The families in which this practice prevails with awe, celebration and reverence are perhaps giving their children a rich background and repertoire. However, the experimental group seemed rather leary of this approach partly because some members had been forced to do it and had learned to resent postponing their hunger for a "Bible verse."

Another problem with this particular approach is that the Bible verses themselves are seldom related to anything that is happening. The child simply memorizes a verse in order to get his dinner. The most commonly quoted verse heard by the writer in Black families all across America has been "Jesus wept."⁵ This kind of bargaining and manipulation should be avoided. The development of oral tradition is natural and never forced.

Some reports have been gathered indicating that

⁵John 11:35

concerned parents have added to this table verse tradition the requirement that children memorize new passages periodically. Other homes have developed or used collections of printed verses which one was permitted to select from a box or file of verses located on the table.

In the first instance, children resented the coercion involved in having to learn another verse every week or every few days. In the second case, the problem was simply a matter of the child's capacity to read and the complete unrelatedness of a passage of scripture picked at random from a file. The emphasis on memory suggested here must in no way be construed as a recommendation that Black or any other families return to a rigid and uninteresting tradition of detached biblical memorization.

The third essential for the recovery of Black Christian oral tradition is the capacity to understand one's children and to be sensitive to their emotional needs and their perceptions as persons in their own right. The African tradition is rich in reverence for the uniqueness of personhood. The key to effective influence or acculturation is not overwhelming pressure or intellectual powers, but understanding and relating to persons, no matter how young.

It is erroneous to assume that great preparation and impressive quotation will automatically influence the

child for good. The experience of the experimental group, as well as many others, would indicate that the results of over intellectualization may at times have been the very reverse. A parent can say the right thing with the wrong motivation, tone or methodology and actually operate at cross purposes with conscious intent. It is crucially important, then, to engage in the use of the oral tradition from a perspective as close to that of the child as possible. It is necessary, like Ezekiel, to "sit where they⁶ sit." Churches seeking to assist parents in the process should recruit and/or employ the most gifted and sensitive of personnel to communicate the necessary insights of child psychology.

To focus on a bibliography of child understanding would work against the purposes, not only because it would give a completely contrary flavor to the establishment of an oral tradition; but because many of the parents involved are not themselves capable of dealing with the printed materials on the subject. In the choice of resource persons to assist in groups of this sort, special emphasis should be placed on obtaining persons whose child psychological insights have been integrated with real expertise in Black experience and Biblical understanding.

The final necessity to a family's recovery or

⁶Ezekiel 3:15

fresh acquisition of an oral religious tradition is a capacity to say the helpful word in the helpful manner and the right context - to match traditional truth, mode of communication, and living situation. No set of instructions or written script can assure success in transmitting the belief base. All one can do is one's best in the major prerequisites. They have been listed as growing personal faith, a vital appropriation/memorization of apt and meaningful expressions of the faith, and a deep and sensitive relationship with children which creates communications and rapport. The point at which these prerequisites are fused may be facilitated somewhat, however, by the joint efforts of a parents' group. The sharing of experiences and the role playing of applications of traditional expressions to selected situations can increase parental insight as well as confidence in making the attempt.

There are no guarantees of success but parents are not required to succeed--only to be faithful in the arduous task of education and acculturation, which is only beginning to be properly understood. The parent plants and waters, but, as Paul said, God gives the increase.⁷ The child must be free, but the beliefs and values which dominate and control the child's world have a way of sprouting and

⁷I Corinthians 3:6.

growing when least expected. One member of the growth group mentioned shared an interesting illustration of this fact:

In our home we give thanks before meals and we talk about giving thanks to God in everything, but had no notion how the kids were taking it in. Last week (5 yr old boy) and I were driving down the street when all of a sudden the car caught on fire. I was pretty shaken by the time the fire had been put out. But can you imagine what said? "Mommy, we should thank God that he didn't let the gas tank catch on fire." I was speechless! And he's only five years old!!⁸

This mother's implanting of a deeply religious view of life was not unique. And the response was not beyond expectation. All persons fall back on the training planted in their so-called unconscious and/or feelings when severe crises come. In his 1974 Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale Henry H. Mitchell reported a survey of Blacks in hospitals which pointed to a kind of cultural dependence on God in extremes. It did not matter how contrary such might be to the person's rational conscious position, or how anti-religious the person's life style. Growing up in Black culture had simply deposited these reserves in their deeps. It is hardly sound to program people to call on God only in a great crisis, and then against their rational will. However, it may still be a bit comforting to Black parents to know that they have yet this much of a God-oriented

⁸Member of experimental growth group of parents, 1973.

world view in their culture. On this a great deal may be rebuilt. God grant us the strength for the task.

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